

GENDER AND SEX STEREOTYPES IN SPORTS ROMANCE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Romance fiction is a billion-dollar industry, and a genre that explores the intricacies of sex and gender because of its focus on human beings and their relationships. Within this genre, the sports romance – a subgenre which emerged in the twenty-first century – is particularly fascinating but problematic in its consideration of sex and gender due to the gendered nature of sport itself. Despite its popularity, there has been very little academic research into sports romance, so this creative thesis is an interdisciplinary study positioned at a junction between popular romance theory, and sport and sociology, drawing on the academic work of scholars such as Pamela Regis, Catherine Roach, Jayashree Kamblé and Eric Anderson. By employing qualitative research methodology involving the close reading of three mainstream sports romances and three queer sports romances, this creative thesis analyses which gendered stereotypes are repeatedly deployed in mainstream sports romance novels, and how and to what effect these stereotypes are challenged in queer sports romance novels. I have approached this creative thesis from a dual perspective, as both a queer athlete and an author of sports romance fiction. My research has aided me in developing my romance writing in order to produce sports romances that are more innovative and nuanced in their consideration of sex and gender. This creative thesis includes an exegesis and a selection of original chapters of my own queer sports romance novel, provisionally titled *Ready to Roll*.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) _____
Alexandra Mulvey

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THESIS INTRODUCTION

In July 2023, sports, sex and social media collided when the wife of National Hockey League player Alex Wennberg pleaded for BookTok users to stop sexualising her husband. BookTok—a literature-focused subgroup of the social media app TikTok—made Wennberg the face of the hockey romance novel after the Seattle Kraken posted a series of videos featuring him. What began as good-natured appreciation soon fell into problematic territory as the fans’ videos became more sexually charged, leading Wennberg’s wife to challenge the double standard regarding the sexual harassment of male athletes (González-Ramírez). The case of BookTok and Alex Wennberg highlights the heteronormativity of the sports romance genre, particularly the hyper-sexualisation of male athletes, and demonstrates the damage that can be caused when fiction bleeds into reality.

The romance genre, possibly more than any other genre, acts as a vehicle for exploring the intricacies of sexuality and gender (Allan, “Gender and Sexuality” 428). Sports romance—a sub-genre which emerged in the twenty-first century—has the power to examine the nuances of sexuality and gender even further because of the inherently gendered nature of sports. This thesis explores ways in which mainstream sports romance novels can reinforce heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality and how queer sports romance novels can challenge these ideas. By performing a close reading of a selection of mainstream and queer sports romances and undertaking analyses of the handling of various recurring themes, I investigate how successful the queer sports romances are at challenging binary gender stereotypes.

I have approached this thesis from a dual perspective, as both a creative writer and as a queer female athlete in the traditionally “feminine” sport of artistic roller skating. Therefore, I have a unique experiential perspective. While the majority of this study draws on the analysis of my six primary texts in conjunction with the existing scholarship, I have also drawn on my experience of skating competitively, both nationally and internationally, representing Australia at three World Championships, and my experience writing my first novel, *Roll With It* (Ravenscroft 2022).

The mainstream sports romance novels I have selected for this study are *From Lukov With Love* (2018) by Mariana Zapata, *The Not-Outcast* (2020) by Tijan and *Icebreaker* (2022) by Hannah Grace. The queer sports romance novels selected are *Edge of Glory* (2017) by Rachel Spangler, *She Drives Me Crazy* (2021) by Kelly Quindlen and *Catch and Cradle* (2021) by Katia

Rose. The selection of these novels was based primarily on their popularity; however, I also considered the sports represented, as well as the inclusion of tropes I found particularly compelling, including bisexual representation, femme/femme couples and lesbian athletes in traditionally “feminine” sports.

Part One consists of an exegesis which will discuss the gender-typing of sports and analyse how this unfolds in sports romance fiction. It will explore how male and female athletes’ bodies are portrayed in both mainstream and queer sports romances and examine the connections between male aggression, contact sports and ideal masculinity. It will then investigate whether lesbian sports romances subvert gender roles effectively or whether the masc/femme dichotomy acts as a disguise for heteronormativity. Finally, it will reflect on how the heroes’ and heroines’ stories end, analysing what the all-important “happily ever after” ending looks like for both straight and queer athletes. Part Two is a creative component, consisting of several chapters of a manuscript, provisionally titled *Ready to Roll*, a queer sports romance, centring around the relationship between Jaz Bannister, a closeted femme lesbian figure skater, and Rhi Walker, an out-lesbian roller derby player.

The goal of this creative thesis is to compare the stereotypes deployed in both mainstream and queer sports romances, discover how they are either reinforced or challenged, and then use the findings to write my own subversive queer sports romance.

PART 1 - EXEGESIS

1.1 Introduction

Sport is a markedly gendered activity because gender segregation is central to most sports. Male and female athletes often compete under different regulations and, in the case of sports such as gymnastics, in completely different events altogether (Adams 218-219). Despite the considerable progress that has been made by governments to encourage gender equality in sports, the sporting landscape remains predominantly male (Plaza et al. 212). Given the known health benefits of physical activity, the comparatively lower number of women and girls participating in sports could be “conceived as a form of discrimination” (202).

A survey published in 2021 found that adolescent girls who wished to participate in sports deemed “masculine” were habitually gender-stereotyped (Bevan et al. 596). Some girls had to “navigate a fear of judgement in being stereotyped as lesbian or manly” (596) while others became victims of taunts for being “girly” and weak (596). The survey showed that despite changing social attitudes and the progress made in women’s sports, girls were still heavily influenced by gender stereotyping when deciding whether to participate in sports. Sports media which frames men’s sports as the default while giving “secondary status” (Fink 333) to women’s sports is a likely contributor to this problem. Female athletes are often referred to by commentators and sports journalists as “great women ... players”, while the same gender differentiations are never made regarding male athletes (334) who are therefore assumed to be the athletic norm. Media coverage also often infantilises women athletes, referring to them as “girls” or “young ladies” (334). There is a serious lack of respectful media coverage of women’s sports compared to men’s sports, and this imbalance demonstrates how news media consistently elevates men’s sports as an institution while simultaneously marginalising women athletes, perpetuating the stereotype that sport is a male activity (Cooky et al. 203).

This inequality is evident in the mainstream sports romance genre which became a popular subgenre around the turn of the twenty-first century. While mainstream sports romances featuring female athletes exist, it is not unusual for the heroine to not be an athlete. The highest ranked books on the Amazon Best Selling Sports Romance list¹ (as of August 21, 2023) feature heroines that include: a single mother who does not recognise the famous hero (Becka Mack’s *Unravel Me* (2023)), a personal assistant to the hero (Stephanie Archer’s *Behind the Net* (2023)),

¹ There is no other website which tracks the popularity of sports romance novels.

the hero's coach's daughter (Mila Kane's *Bad Intentions* (2023)), and the hero's teammate's sister (Adriana Locke's *The Proposal* (2023) and Avery Keeland's *Shutout* (2023)). The heroines are relegated to support roles and the stories are focused on male athletes and the women who love them.

1.2 Manly Men, Manly Sports/Girly Girls, Girly Sports

Individual sports are often gender-typed into “masculine” and “feminine” sports, creating stereotypes that transcend most cultures (Plaza et al. 208) and impact the participation and performance of the sports by members of a particular gender (202). For example, contact sports are perceived as masculine, while sports favouring grace, flexibility and artistry are perceived as feminine (203). Observers tend to gender-type sports based on the “unbalanced proportions of men and women practising” (203). Even if individuals do not explicitly endorse these gendered ideas, they can still hold implicit beliefs based on gendered stereotypes, affecting their decision of whether to participate in a particular sport (203).

The gender-typing of individual sports is evident in mainstream sports romances. In cases where the heroine is an athlete, there is a tendency for her to participate in aesthetic sports such as figure skating or gymnastics. She is feminine and lean, and therefore beautiful. This is the case in Zapata's *From Lukov With Love* (2018) and Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022). The heroes of the sports romance tend to play contact sports such as hockey, football or boxing. They are strong and “manly” and therefore, desirable. A perusal of the sports romance tag on Instagram and TikTok shows that the vast majority of the most popular sports romances feature hockey players. This is the case in Tijan's *The Not-Outcast* (2020) and Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022), and the oversexualisation of fictional hockey players has already proven to have negative real-world repercussions through the Booktok versus Alex Wennberg scandal. Men's participation in “feminine” sports such as figure skating often comes with the stereotypical presumption that the male athletes are effeminate or gay (Adams 237), therefore, an author who is writing a heterosexual male hero figure skater can over-compensate in order to prove his masculinity. This is evident in Zapata's *From Lukov With Love* (2018). Ivan Lukov is a figure skater competing in pair skating, but his masculinity is accentuated through Zapata's decision to imbue him with stereotypically masculine traits such as aggression, hyper-competitiveness and a reluctance to be vulnerable. He is also well-endowed and highly skilled in bed. In contrast, Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022) features a male pair skater as an antagonist. Grace's decision to give the villain stereotypically feminine traits such as passive aggression, “bitchiness” and a preoccupation with

diet puts him in direct contrast with Zapata's hero and can be viewed as the demonisation of men in "feminine" sports.

Over the twenty-five years I have participated in the traditionally "feminine" sport of artistic roller skating, I have witnessed many talented young men and boys retire prematurely for fear of harassment from their peers. For this reason, when I wrote my first novel, *Roll With It* (Ravenscroft 2022), I felt it important to create a male hero who participated in a "feminine" sport, who was secure in his identity and who challenged the notions of traditional masculinity. This hero was James Sunderland, a heterosexual male artistic roller skater who possessed more stereotypically feminine traits than stereotypically masculine ones. I allowed James to speak his emotions freely, showing depictions of him openly crying. I gave him a circle of platonic female friends, the presence of which evoked no jealousy from the heroine. I made him sensitive, gentle and emotionally intelligent, although, as much as I sought to break the mould with my depiction of a male sporting hero, there was still a traditional gender binary present. There were times when I leaned into gender stereotypes in order to fulfil the romance novel fantasy that I believed the predominantly cisgender-heterosexual (henceforth, cis-het) female audience would want to read.

One of the most prominent stereotypes surrounding women in sport is the "association of female athletic competency with lesbianism" (Hargreaves and Anderson 8). Historically, this association was stigmatised resulting in the creation of the lesbian "bogywoman" (Griffin 265), an "effective social control mechanism [used] to trivialize, marginalize and stigmatize women athletes" (265). With the public outing of lesbian athletes such as Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova in the 1980s and the subsequent loss of their sponsorships and endorsements (266), the fear of being labelled as a lesbian was significant for many female athletes and was often deflected using weaponised femininity (Hargreaves and Anderson 9). From wearing skirts and make-up and having long fingernails despite the impracticality, to emphasising their feminine hobbies or frequently commenting to media about their boyfriends or husbands (Cahn 354) the fear of being labelled as a lesbian caused women athletes to lean into problematic counter-stereotypes of what it means to be a heterosexual woman. The emphasis on these "feminine" traits and their inextricable link with heterosexuality is dismissive of femme lesbians, particularly femme lesbians who participate in "feminine" sports, as they are performing their own kind of gender transgression.

The stereotype that all successful female athletes must be masculine-presenting lesbians is damaging to both lesbian and heterosexual women athletes as it conflates athleticism with

masculinity. This downplays the achievements of feminine-presenting athletes, leading to the devaluation of “feminine” or female-dominated sports. This is evident in the case of figure skating, where the popularity of the sport among women has led to “a pronounced emphasis on gender difference” (Adams 237). In my experience, growing up as a girl in a “girly” sport meant that I was often dismissed by peers who deemed my sport to not be a “real” sport, and my sporting achievements were routinely overlooked in favour of the achievements of footballers, swimmers and cricketers. Katharina Lindner argues that women participating in “female-appropriate sports” are seen as non-threatening because the elements of the sport “fit neatly into established heteronormative gender binaries” (489). While this may be true, it is dismissive of the femme lesbian athlete experience. The only novel selected for this study that features a femme lesbian athlete in a feminine sport is Quindlen’s *She Drives Me Crazy* (2021). In this novel, Irene Abraham is a cheerleader, and her goal for her final year of high school is to win Student Athlete of the Year. This goal is scoffed at by the book’s female protagonist Scottie, who says:

“It just seems like a waste of your energy ... You’re obviously going to win Homecoming Queen tomorrow night, which is a natural extension of being cheerleading captain, but instead of focusing on that, you’re thirsting after an athletic award you stand no chance of winning?”. (Quindlen 60)

Scottie’s attitude is directly challenged by Irene, who establishes her position as a femme lesbian athlete in a “feminine” sport. Irene defends her athleticism despite her decision to embrace femininity through her appearance and behaviour, and the two girls partake in discourse of what is and is not a real sport. Scottie implies that cheerleading is not a real sport because the team is not competing for anything, claiming: “You’re not actually winning or losing anything. It’s just a performance. A performance you’re doing for *someone else*” (59) – a view which is dismissive of competitive cheerleading. Scottie even questions the feminism of cheerleading by claiming that the cheerleaders are merely supporters of the boy’s team. Irene, however, points out the anti-feminism of Scottie’s position, responding sarcastically: “Wow, aren’t you such a bastion of feminism, tearing down other girls because you think we’re oblivious to misogyny” (59).

At the beginning of the book, Irene's sexuality is not common knowledge, whereas Scottie's is. These are assumptions made by the fellow student body, based solely on stereotypical modes of presentation. Scottie declares that she is not like other girls:

They speak a common language I've never understood, with shimmery words like contouring and bandeaus and bralettes. It's their birthright, this ability to be like any other girl. I've never had the same birthright, and I've understood that since long before I heard the word *gay*. (Quindlen 76)

Quindlen's use of the "not like other girls" trope for Scottie shows that Scottie sees herself as more subversive, more oppressed and therefore "more gay" than Irene. It can be determined from Scottie's narration and her thoughts on cheerleaders and cheerleading as a sport that she rejects femininity, even going as far as to disrespect other girls who embrace it.

Scottie's feminism regarding sport is more reminiscent of second wave feminism, which was occupied with the rejection of typical femininity, while Irene's stance is more in line with the third wave idea that women should be free to do and present however they like, feminine or otherwise. Scottie's attitude towards "feminine" sports does not appear to reflect the beliefs of the author since they are countered by Irene's. Instead, it is evident that Quindlen is using the two girls' athletic differences to comment on the devaluation of "feminine" sports as well as the assumption that lesbian athletes must always be masculine-presenting.

I hope to make similar commentary with my protagonist Jaz Bannister in *Ready to Roll*. Jaz is a closeted lesbian, afraid to come out to her religious parents. Due to her sheltered, conservative upbringing, Jaz holds her own set of internalised stereotypes about what lesbians should look like and how they should behave. She is feminine and she enjoys presenting that way; however, she feels that this presentation is performative and, if she wishes to be taken seriously as a lesbian, she needs to change. This internal conundrum is explored through her experience learning about roller derby. To Jaz, a femme lesbian with a background in an aesthetic sport, the idea of a contact sport such as roller derby feels like an opportunity to prove her mettle and her masculinity and become the embodiment of her warped perception of what a lesbian athlete should be. However, Jaz's journey will involve the dismantling of her stereotypical views and will culminate in the acceptance of herself and her validity as a femme lesbian athlete.

1.3 The Hotties with the (Able) Bodies

Despite our modern knowledge regarding the less-desirable effects of steroids on the male body, including the lowering of testosterone levels and risk of impotence, there has been an historical association of muscular male physique with sexual virility (Dutton 218). This association created a stereotype that has been prevalent in advertising and gym culture for decades (218-219) and which is evident in many mainstream romance novels. Masculinities scholar Jonathan Allan noted in his article, “The Purity of His Maleness: Masculinities in Popular Romance Novels”, that (mainstream) romance novels hold within them a “kind of institutional homophobia that lurks in the background ... and is written on the hero’s body” (35). In other words, there is a desire for the ideal romance hero’s body to not be feminine, therefore not weak, and therefore not queer.

In a society that deems bodies with physical limitations and disabilities as undesirable and asexual (Sparkes et al. 179), the able-bodied athlete’s physique, which is both aesthetically pleasing *and* highly functional, becomes the perfect subject of a romance reader’s fantasy, as evidenced by the Alex Wennberg BookTok scandal. Professional able-bodied male athletes possess what many would perceive as perfect male bodies, that is, bodies which are large in every sense of the word; tall, muscular and generously endowed, and therefore, virile and sexually desirable. A prime example of this is the hero Cut Ryder in Tijan’s *The Not-Outcast* (2020). Tijan first introduces the reader to Cut through the heroine Cheyenne’s physical description, comparing his past physique with his present: “He’d not been built in high school. He’d been a lean guy, and that made him fast on the ice ... Watching him in college, then throughout the NHL, he had morphed. He was all man now ... He was standing there and he was virile” (Tijan 37-38). In this scene, Cheyenne intrinsically links Cut’s leanness with his boyishness, determining that it was not until he became “built” that he could be considered “all man” and “virile” (37-38).

An emphasis on large male athlete bodies is similarly deployed in Grace’s *Icebreaker* (2022), when the heroine (Anastasia) describes the hero (Nate) as someone who “towers over [her] by at least a foot” and has “broad shoulders, [and] thick muscles straining against the sleeves of his Henley” (Grace 29). Anastasia also refers to her casual sexual partner Ryan as being “six feet six inches of pure athletic perfection” (4), reducing the idea of the perfect male athlete body to a “jock” stereotype, despite the diverse range of body shapes and sizes evident in a variety of sports. In both Tijan’s *The Not-Outcast* (2020) and Grace’s *Icebreaker* (2022) the

size discrepancy between the large, strong hero and the small, light heroine is emphasised, particularly during sexual encounters, creating a sense that the sexual dynamic between the characters is binary and heteronormative.

Size discrepancy is deployed even further in Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022) in order to elevate the hero (Nate) above the villain, male figure skater, Aaron:

Nate is a big guy, much bigger than Aaron. He's a good half a foot taller, broader, more muscular. Not to mention a freaking hockey player. Aaron is built like a ballet dancer, strong, too, but lean. Plus, he has never been in a fight in his cushy, privileged life (Grace 42-43).

Aaron is a male athlete in a stereotypically "feminine" sport, and Grace uses size discrepancy to diminish his masculinity. He is described in stereotypically feminine terms such as being "built like a ballet dancer" (43), and for the most part he is not physically aggressive, instead his antagonism is displayed through passive aggression or "bitchiness".

When considering the stereotype which connects virility with a large, muscular physique, the lean body of the male figure skater could be deemed as less desirable. When Aaron is injured and Nate suggests Anastasia practice with him instead, he brags that he is "much stronger than Aaron" (211). Grace frequently depicts Aaron as not being strong enough to lift Anastasia, whereas Nate lifts her with ease both during training and during sex, inextricably linking "feminine" sports—and male athletes who participate in them—with weakness, a stereotype with no basis given the strength required to perform the tasks of a male pair skater. Aaron reads as a feminised male character where his lack of stereotypically ideal masculinity is directly linked with his "feminine" display of antagonism.

While Grace leans into this stereotype in *Icebreaker* (2022) Zapata subverts it in *From Lukov With Love* (2018). Zapata's hero (Ivan) is a male figure skater, and the heroine (Jasmine) celebrates his physique, claiming that she can "appreciate all the different forms male athletes held", and stating that she is attracted to "raw strength in all its shapes" (Zapata 230). This appreciation of body diversity is in direct contrast with Grace's notion of "pure athletic perfection" (Grace 4) in *Icebreaker* (2022). Zapata describes Ivan's body as being "painted by a master" with shoulder muscles "drawn by pen" (230). By using softer imagery such as "painted" and "drawn" as opposed to stronger, more commonly used terms such as "chiselled", "sculpted"

or “built”, Zapata creates a less hyper-masculinised image for Ivan. Zapata also describes Ivan as having “lean, rigid muscles” and a “high and tight” backside (231), a less conventional image than that of the broad-chested, muscle-bound sporting hero, yet he is still desired by the heroine and therefore framed as desirable to the reader. The only instance where Zapata leans into the “large male athlete” stereotype is in her description of Ivan as being extremely well-endowed. Heroine Jasmine notes that Ivan has “huge balls” that “[make her] wonder what the hell he did with [them] in his costumes” (233). During their first sexual encounter she is surprised by his size, declaring: “What kind of bullshit was this that someone so long and lean had that monster between his legs?” (473). Male athletes in mainstream sports romances may come in different shapes and sizes, but it seems they still must be generously endowed and great in bed.

There is less emphasis on the athlete’s body as a sexual object in the queer sports romances than in the mainstream ones. There are some instances in Spangler’s *Edge of Glory* (2017) most of which are initiated by Corey, who is interestingly the more masculine-presenting lesbian character (more in section 1.5); however, the focus is predominantly on the capabilities of the protagonists’ bodies. Alpine skier Elise is recovering from what could have been a career-ending injury, and snowboarder Corey is thirty and has begun feeling the effects of aging. Elise is trying to make a comeback and Corey is coming to the end of her career. The mental repercussions associated with overcoming injury or facing the end of a career become internal barriers within the two women, and act as a barrier to the romantic relationship which, Pamela Regis argues, is one of the “eight essential elements” of the romance novel (32-33).

The athletes’ bodies are not emphasised much in Quindlen’s *She Drives Me Crazy* (2021) or Rose’s *Catch and Cradle* (2021) beyond a passing mention of attraction in the former, and during the sexual encounters in the latter, keeping in tone with the scene. These novels focus more on the characters’ inner lives, as well as the actual sports and the politics that come with them. It would seem from this observation that the athlete’s body as an object of desire is a mostly heteronormative quality deployed to fulfil the romance fantasy for the (mostly) cis-het female reader. With the heteronormativity removed, the body is secondary to the inner workings of the mind, and the story focuses more intently on the athlete as an athlete, instead of as a sexual object.

Athletes of all genders who participate in aesthetic sports such as figure skating report higher rates of eating disorders than non-athletes (Krentz and Warschburger 379). However, rates of body dissatisfaction as a catalyst for disordered eating are not necessarily higher (380). Instead, one of the factors most likely to contribute to disordered eating in athletes is the desire

to improve performance by becoming leaner, lighter (379) and in the case of figure skating, more aerodynamic. Despite male athletes being more likely to develop disordered eating behaviours than their non-athlete counterparts, eating disorders are still stereotypically perceived to be a predominantly feminine issue (Gallagher et al. 30). The athlete's relationship with food is a common theme in the sports romances selected for this study, with some delving deeper into the issue while others make passing comments which perpetuate a stereotypical difference between male and female athletes' diets. The male athletes in "masculine" sports are frequently shown to be consuming large quantities of high-caloric food. The female athletes in gender-neutral or "masculine" sports eat similarly. In Rose's *Catch and Cradle* (2022), lacrosse player Hope comments that the owner of the pizza restaurant jokes about them eating more pizza than the football team (147), and in Spangler's *Edge of Glory* (2017), snowboarder Corey frequently consumes large quantities of high-caloric food. In contrast, the female athletes in "feminine" sports tend to favour lean protein and vegetables.

The ideal figure skater's body as displayed through media, whether it be through event coverage or representations in fictionalised film and television is flexible, small in stature and with an extremely low body-fat percentage, a body which is stereotypically feminine. In Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022), the heroine's body and its size and capabilities are running themes throughout the novel. Anastasia has an unhealthy, disordered relationship with food. She adds small snacks to a food tracker (Grace 8), follows a low-carb diet, and opts for chicken salads over burgers when out with her friends before recognising and ignoring that she is still hungry (42). Even the hero Nate recognises her symptoms and suggests that her bad moods and severe bruising are a result of being undernourished (219). Her disordered eating patterns are facilitated in part by her skating partner Aaron who complains that she is difficult to lift, and who creates for her an unsustainable diet plan. Despite Anastasia's friend suggesting, "If [Aaron] couldn't lift [her], he needs to work harder in the gym" (42), Aaron sees it as being up to Anastasia to under-fuel her athletic body so that she is easier to lift, perpetuating the stereotypical image of the ideal female figure skater's body. It is crucial to note that Anastasia's size and disordered eating is not framed as a positive, but as something that she needs to overcome, which she does with the help of Nate who provides her with a more nourishing eating plan which focuses on fuelling the body instead of restricting it.

Despite the stereotype of the "waifish female figure skater", figure skaters require powerful and strong bodies in order to compete at their peak, and the focus on small female bodies which take up less space than their male counterparts is undermining of the "empowering" potential of girls' and women's engagement in these sports" (Lindner 490). This

stereotype is subverted in Zapata's *From Lukov With Love* (2018). The heroine Jasmine does not appear to have an unhealthy relationship with food; in fact, she is shown to be actively fuelling her hungry body with complex carbohydrates (Zapata 234) and working out in the gym to "get [her] heart ready for the 180-200 beats per minute it was going to be pumping during [their] free skate" (234). Jasmine's focus is on preparing her body to perform powerfully at an elite level, not on reducing her size and making herself less visible.

It is heartening to see that contemporary sports romances are recognising the long-standing problem of eating disorders among female athletes in aesthetic sports and, instead of leaning into stereotypes of thin, waifish bodies, are placing emphasis on a balanced diet, strength and empowerment. It would be even more subversive for a sports romance to include representation of male athletes with eating disorders, as the associated stigma has already led to male eating disorders being underrepresented and under-researched (Gallagher et al. 30).

Professional or elite able-bodied athletes are defined by what their bodies are capable of. If they succumb to injury or illness, then their future becomes limited. In sports romances the well-being of the body holds high stakes, and in two of the mainstream sports romances chosen for this study, an athlete's injury is integral to the sports narrative. In Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022), Anastasia's skating partner's injury is an inciting incident which leads her to train with Nate as an alternative. In Zapata's *From Lukov With Love*, Jasmine breaks her ankle during training which disrupts her and Ivan's preparation for the competition season (413). It is then revealed in the epilogue that Ivan and Jasmine's career ended due to Ivan suffering a life-threatening spinal injury (483). It is interesting to observe that in these books the male athletes who participate in the "masculine" sports do not sustain the injuries, despite the high-risk of contact sport. Both cases of male athlete injury come from male figure skaters, and where the female athlete is injured, it is up to the male athlete to nurse her back to health. While a nurturing male character appears to be a subversion of a gendered stereotype, the injury and subsequent sidelining of the female character or the male character participating in a "feminine" sport suggests fragility.

In my own sports romance *Roll With It* (Ravenscroft 2022), the heroine, artistic roller pair skater Ainslie suffers a high impact fall during training, leading to a concussion and a hip injury which ultimately ruins her and her partner James's chances of a World Championship victory. James is left to nurse Ainslie back to health while dealing with the guilt of accidentally causing the fall. While an injury to the athlete's body is a reasonable plot point to include considering the high stakes of competitive sport, and despite the fact that pair skating is a high-risk sport,

perhaps if I was writing *Roll With It* (2022) today I might rethink my decision to injure Ainslie and instead search for a more subversive plot point.

1.4 Play Hard, Love Harder: Male Aggression and The Sports Romance Hero

In his seminal paper “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, Michael Kimmel argued that “manhood” as a social construct is something which men prove to one another by performing certain acts which may be deemed heroic, dangerous and of high risk (64-65). He argued that “homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood” (65), claiming that one of the key reasons why men feel pressured to prove their masculinity is to alleviate any suspicion that they might be gay. Kimmel’s claim can also be seen in the construction of the romance hero. Historically, romance novels have adapted their portrayal of the romance hero to add or remove “markers of heterosexuality” (Kamblé 88) depending on what is societally considered to reflect ideal masculinity. Kimmel’s argument is best demonstrated through the sexually aggressive romance heroes of the 1960s and 1970s; heroes who could be described as caricatures of staunch heteronormativity, possessing traits antithetical to the gay male hero (Kamblé 111) in order to remove any suspicion of queerness and, therefore, weakness. During key moments in queer history where progress has been made, the romance hero has changed in response, being allowed to possess more “feminine” traits (129). This trend is similar to a trend predicted by queer sports scholar Eric Anderson, who theorised that the reduction of homophobia in general society could lead to a “softening of masculinity through the less rigid policing of its gendered borders” (30).

The fear of being perceived as weak is something which has historically marred traditional masculinity (Kimmel 65) and it is notably demonstrated in the realm of competitive sport. Despite the generally positive progress made regarding gay rights in Western society, the sporting arena has been slow to catch up (Anderson 21). Eric Anderson calls sports a “bastion of hegemonic masculinity” (21) – a foundational concept coined by Raewyn Connell in 1987. According to James Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity is a “specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between ... masculinity and femininity” (86). It exists in relation to women and to “various subordinated masculinities” (Connell 183). Anderson’s argument that sports facilitate hegemonic masculinity can be observed in the most popular of men’s sports. The sports which are most frequently represented in mainstream sports romances (ie. hockey and football) are sports which foster an environment where only the toughest can succeed, and any sign of “subordinated

masculinit[y]” (Connell 183) is perceived as weakness and is incompatible with the “quest for victory” (Anderson 21). The victory in a sports romance is often just as important as the couple’s “happily ever after” (HEA) ending required by the genre, therefore anything which might be a detriment to that victory needs to be removed.

While the heroes featured in the sports romance novels selected for this study possess some subversive masculine traits, there are still instances of male aggression present. By choosing to create a sports romance hero who plays a contact sport such as hockey or football, an author has already positioned their hero to require the aggressive traits needed to be successful at that sport (Anderson 22). The fact that these are the most popular sports represented in the sports romance shows that there is a market for an aggressive hero and that some of the traits synonymous with male aggression are still deemed attractive by many romance readers.

Cut Ryder from Tijan’s *The Not-Outcast* (2020) is the most outwardly aggressive hero in the novels chosen for this study. The heroine Cheyenne recalls knowing him in high school and remembers him being “adorable” and well-loved, although she also notes that “being a hockey player he’d not want to be known as adorable” (Tijan 4). This soft language paints a picture of Cut as a kind boy, but when the reader meets Cut from his own perspective, they discover he is now a sexually aggressive man. He uses dehumanising language, referring to women as “chick[s]” (25) and using phrases such as “tapping this ass” (26), and the first time he sees Cheyenne he becomes possessive, infuriated that she is speaking to another man and demanding to know “What fucking guy?” she is talking to (29). He is overcome with an animalistic, primal urge to claim her:

I wanted to see her nipples. I wanted to sink three fingers inside of her as my hello, then push her back against the wall and drop my mouth to hers. That’s exactly how I wanted to introduce myself to her. Then maybe I’d tell her my name before asking for hers. (29)

Cut’s desire to sexually touch Cheyenne before even knowing her name and with no mention of consent is reminiscent of the aggressive heroes of a bygone era and leans into a tired stereotype, despite Tijan’s choice to unpack that stereotype later by revealing Cut’s softer side. He is aware that when he plays hockey, an inherently aggressive sport, he becomes violent, stating: “On the ice, I killed” (30). He even acknowledges that the aggressive, hyper-competitive side of his personality, which he usually reserves for the hockey rink, is rearing its head as he

watches Cheyenne speak to another man, stating: “I was reacting from some inner emotions that I’d never tapped into before. I’d never had a reaction like this” (31). His aggression is inextricably linked to his sporting practice, which is linked to his masculinity, his virility and his sexuality.

It is unsurprising that there are depictions of male aggression in hockey romances, considering the aggressive nature of the sport, however the straight male figure skaters depicted in Zapata’s *From Lukov With Love* (2018) and Grace’s *Icebreaker* (2022) are both shown to display varying levels of aggression, albeit in different ways. Ivan from Zapata’s *From Lukov With Love* (2018) is the hero of his story, and his aggression is non-threatening and manifests primarily as hyper-competitiveness. It is important for the reader to know that, despite Ivan’s participation in a “feminine” sport, he is still “all man” and part of that is his desire to dominate (in this case, in his sport). Aaron from Grace’s *Icebreaker* (2022) is the antagonist in his story and his aggression is more passive, making snide comments and exhibiting controlling behaviour but shying away from physical altercations. Grace’s decision to imbue him with stereotypically feminine aggressive traits villainises men in feminine sports, framing them as predatory towards and controlling of their woman counterparts. Her decision to have Aaron flee from acts of male aggression frames him as weak, and therefore less of a man.

When I wrote *Roll With It* (Ravenscroft 2022), I was determined to subvert the notion of male aggression as a desirable trait. Given the rates of domestic violence in Australia, with 57 women killed by men in 2022—the majority of which were killed by an intimate partner (Fitz-Gibbon)—I wanted to ensure that my hero did not possess any traits which could be considered “red flags”. Instead, I placed these traits where I believed they belonged, with the antagonist Aidan. Aidan is emotionally, verbally and physically aggressive towards the heroine Ainslie and he should be viewed as an undesirable choice for her. His abuse of Ainslie is initially displayed through controlling behaviour masquerading as concern, before developing into the threat of physical violence. This was done to demonstrate that the “red flags” which are sometimes evident in mainstream romance heroes should never be ignored lest they develop into real danger for the heroine. The hero James was created to be the antithesis of the aggressive male hero. With his kindness, vulnerability and sensitivity James is a safe man and this is what makes him desirable to Ainslie and hopefully, to the reader.

Given that *Ready to Roll* is a lesbian sports romance, there is no male hero. However, the link between masculinity and aggression is still critiqued through the lens of the stereotypical, masculine-presenting roller derby player. Roller derby is a unique sport which possesses

qualities which could stereotypically make it a “masculine” sport (ie. physical contact, point scoring, aggression) while being predominantly a women’s sport. In this way, roller derby “queer[s] convention” (Gieseler 764) and as a result is a sport popular with queer and other marginalised folk. My protagonist, Jaz discovers the queerness of the roller derby community and recognises it as a safe space for her as a queer athlete. However, Jaz has a limited world view and her stereotypical belief that lesbians must embrace masculinity in order to be validated is at odds with her true love of the feminine sport of figure skating, which creates a barrier that she needs to overcome in order for her to reach her sporting happily ever after.

1.5 Gays in Straight Clothing: Binary Role-Playing in the Lesbian Sports Romance

Even in lesbian romances, traditional gender roles can occasionally be seen emerging. A familiar dynamic between lesbian love interests is the butch/femme relationship. Post-Stonewall lesbian feminists criticised this dynamic as “binary role-playing” (Matelski 71-72). The butch/femme dichotomy can be problematic when it only paints the butch partner as the dominant partner, making it seem as though the butch lesbian is more confident in her sexuality while the femme partner is still uncertain, or worse, “straight” and seduced. A survey undertaken in 2002 by Levitt and Horne discovered that femme lesbians became aware of their sexual identity later in life (30) which could be an indicator of how this stereotype came to be. The fact that femme lesbians are often slower to realise their sexual identity than butch lesbians is itself an issue based on a stereotypical perception of how lesbians should look and behave.

While none of the queer sports romances selected for this study deploy a strict butch/femme dynamic, the heroines in Spangler’s *Edge of Glory* (2017) possess certain traits which could stereotypically align with masculinity or femininity. For example, snowboarder Corey takes on the more masculine role—even her name is masculine or androgynous—and she is described as having “her father’s muscle tone and strong jawline” (Spangler 17). Alpine skier Elise takes on the more feminine role and is described as having “long, blonde hair falling down past her shoulders and eyes such an icy shade of blue they appeared almost translucent from a distance” (10). There are many other traits possessed by Corey and Elise which place them as either the masculine or the feminine partner. Corey’s chosen sport, snowboard-cross, is an extreme sport which, prior to its inclusion in the Olympics in 2006, had its competitive season culminate with the X-Games. Corey and her teammates are portrayed as fearless to the point of recklessness and are looked down upon by more traditional athletes for their devil-may-care attitudes. Given that snowboard-cross is a high-risk, dangerous sport, which can involve contact

with other racers on the course, it could be considered a stereotypically masculine sport. In contrast, Elise's sport of downhill alpine skiing involves no contact, as individual athletes ski the course alone. Alpine skiing is still an extremely dangerous sport, however, given the lack of contact involved it could be considered a gender-neutral sport rather than completely "masculine" or "feminine". Corey refers to the alpine skiers as "uptight, type A, snobs" while Elise refers to the snowboarders as "immature, reckless burnouts" (97) – a highly stereotypical sporting binary.

There is even a binary difference between Corey and Elise's diet. Corey mentions her "cheat days", enjoying a high-caloric diet similar to that of the male athletes in mainstream sports romances. She brags of the occasion when she ate twelve tacos (52) or the time she ate "pizza for sixty days in a row" (37). In contrast, Elise is horrified by Corey's diet and is shown eating salads and plain chicken breast. She is described as methodically eating her food, cutting it up into "tiny bites and [chewing] slowly" (18), behaviour which is consistent with disordered eating, which—as discussed in Section 1.3—is stereotypically feminine.

Corey has an extensive sexual history involving numerous female athletes and is portrayed by the media as a seducer of women, perpetuating the "predatory lesbian" stereotype. This does not seem to be a stereotype that Spangler endorses, and the media's behaviour is criticised by the characters. Nevertheless, by characterising Corey as a player and the instigator of most relationships, Spangler has attributed some stereotypically masculine traits to her. When Corey meets Elise, she first notices Elise's body, commenting on her "spectacular ass" (28). The objectification of Elise's body by Corey (though it is not outwardly expressed) is another example of a masculine stereotype being deployed, however Corey also notices Elise's eyes which "[send] a chill down her spine" (10), evoking a stereotypically feminine feeling. During their first sexual encounter Corey is the first partner to "top", that is, give the pleasure. She uses digital penetration and takes on a more active, stereotypically masculine role (203). When positions are reversed, Elise chooses to provide pleasure orally while Corey places her hand on her head, leading the movement (208), still taking an active role and creating a sense of binary.

Is it possible to eschew heteronormative binaries in the presentation of same-sex partners? Katia Rose's queer lacrosse romance *Catch and Cradle* (2021) is instructive in this regard. Rose's novel does not include binary role-playing and virtually removes heteronormativity from the narrative entirely. There are a small number of heterosexual side characters, all of whom are supportive and loving toward the queer main cast, with one even declaring, "Claws out to tear up the gender binary!" (Rose 130). The story also features a prominent non-binary character, for

whom the college lacrosse team is inclusively renamed the “Women’s Plus” team. Although this accommodation is only made on the campus and the heteronormativity of the broader league is criticised by one of the heroine’s, who declares: “Sports really need to catch up in the gender department” (130). Of the two heroines, Hope is bisexual, and Becca is a lesbian. Both are feminine-presenting and there is a distinct equality between them, with neither taking up a more masculine/dominant or feminine/submissive role. Even though Becca is more sexually experienced than Hope, her instruction during their first sexual encounter (Ch. 13) is respectful with an emphasis on enthusiastic consent, and despite Becca’s slightly more dominant role, this is still subversive due to her femme presentation.

Historically, while butch lesbians have faced discrimination from heterosexual people, femme lesbians have faced discrimination from both inside and outside the community, with their sexuality often questioned or disregarded as seeking attention from the male gaze. Lesbian feminists of the 1970s and 1980s often saw femininity as a “manifestation of patriarchal power” (Brightwell and Taylor 26) with femme lesbians conforming to patriarchy by embracing their femininity. This notion is explored and critiqued in Quindlen’s *She Drives Me Crazy* (2022). There is still an evident gender binary in the presentation of the characters, although Quindlen makes some interesting subversions. Scottie—another female character with a masculine name—is a basketballer who rejects femininity, although she is quiet and introverted—traits which are at odds with stereotypical masculinity. Irene is a cheerleader who embraces femininity, but who is also outspoken and frequently uses profanities—traits which do not align with stereotypical femininity.

Scottie and Irene provide an example of the difference between how masculine-presenting lesbians and feminine-presenting lesbians are perceived, with Irene’s lesbianism often unrecognised or invalidated by other characters. I explore similar themes in *Ready to Roll*. However, in my protagonist’s case, her lesbianism is not invalidated as much by others as it is by herself. My protagonist Jaz Bannister is feminine-presenting, and she does not particularly want to change this. She questions her newly discovered sexuality because she does not fit the idea that she has of what lesbians look like. Her brother and closest ally Chris even comments that she is not a “lesbian lesbian”, falling back on his own false, stereotypical perception. The Bannister siblings, being raised in a conservative, religious household, have a narrow worldview. Their lack of exposure to the queer community has given them a warped perception of lesbians which has been shaped by stereotypes. Exposure to the queer community and a broadening of Jaz’s worldview is crucial to her character arc, so she can discover that lesbians are more than a selection of stereotypes and her sexuality is still valid if she is a feminine-presenting lesbian in

an aesthetic sport. While butch lesbian characters work to counteract traditional expectations of women by embracing masculinity, femme lesbian characters, like Jaz, remind readers that the lesbian community is diverse (Matelski 82).

1.6 Hetero-Ever-After

The romance novel's "happily ever after" ending (HEA in industry terms) is critical. Both the Romance Writers of America and the Romance Writers of Australia state that the modern romance novel has two basic elements: it must have a love story at the centre of its plot, and it must conclude with an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending". Pamela Regis lists the "betrothal" as one of her formalist essential elements (37-38) and Catherine Roach writes that the romance leads to "healing, great sex, and happiness" (21). In the case of the sports romance, the novel often concludes with both a romantic HEA for the couple as well as a sporting HEA for the athlete or athletes. In Zapata's *From Lukov With Love* (2018), pair figure skaters Jasmine and Ivan eventually become Olympic gold medallists before retiring and enjoying a long and successful coaching career. In both Tijan's *The Not-Outcast* (2020) and Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022) the hockey playing heroes go on to win the Stanley Cup. Pair skater, Anastasia from Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022) leaves her toxic partner and wins Olympic gold in ladies singles.

In all three of these mainstream cis-het sports romances, the athletic achievements of the characters occur off the page, between the conclusion of the main story and the beginning of the epilogue. Despite sports being an integral part of the characters' identities, all three epilogues frame the career-defining athletic achievements as secondary to the heteronormative HEA: monogamous, heterosexual marriage and the fertility of the female characters. By the beginning of the epilogue, the hero and the heroine are married or engaged, and either have children or are pregnant, with the birth or impending birth of the child effectively ending (or at least halting) the career of the woman athlete. The epilogue of Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022) is set two years in the future. The heroine Anastasia is now pregnant and engaged to the hero Nate, who is now playing in the NHL. Despite Anastasia's figure skating career being previously emphasised as the most important aspect of her life, the epilogue provides only two lines which hint at her career success. The first line is spoken by a very minor character who—in reference to Anastasia's unborn daughter—declares: "I'm sure with a gold medalist for a mother and a Stanley Cup winner for a father, whatever she decides to be, she'll be the best at it" (Grace 423). This attitude diminishes the achievements and hard work of the parents as something to be simply inherited by the child. The second line referring to Anastasia's career comes from Anastasia herself who

narrates: “My pre-Olympic debut anxiety caus[ed] me to vomit up my contraceptive pill. I won gold in the women’s singles” (424). In both instances Anastasia’s Olympic gold—the ultimate career success for many athletes—is overshadowed by the true focus: her pregnancy. This perpetuates the stereotype that when women have children, they lose their identity as an individual and become a mother above all else.

Zapata’s *From Lukov With Love* (2018) deploys a similar conclusion. The epilogue is set ten years after the main story and we learn that in the interim, the pair had an incredibly successful sporting career including three National titles, two World titles, two Olympic golds, and Ivan becoming the most decorated figure skater in US history (Zapata 483). These are the sporting achievements that athletes dream of, but as Jasmine concludes in the epilogue: “Most importantly it had been nine years since we’d gotten married” (483). It is also revealed that the pair have had three children, one of whom was accidentally conceived the night the pair won their second world championship title (484). Once again, the heroine’s sporting prowess is overshadowed by her fertility.

Unplanned pregnancy is a recurring theme in all three mainstream sports romances, with two of the unplanned pregnancies occurring in direct opposition to the heroine’s initial desires. Anastasia from Grace’s *Icebreaker* (2022), as an adopted child herself, states that she has always wanted to adopt (Grace 325). While she jokingly claims that “pushing out [Nate’s] big-ass baby would absolutely wreck [her] vagina” (325) the true reason she desires adoption is undoubtedly because of her own positive experience as an adopted child (150). However, in the epilogue we learn that, in spite of this desire, Anastasia is now pregnant. A similar scene plays out in Tijan’s *The Not-Outcast* (2020). In this book, in what could initially be seen as a subversive HEA, Cheyenne and Cut decide to become foster parents. This decision is in part due to Cheyenne’s experience as an abused child who faced bouts of homelessness. This slight subversion is wound back when the end of the epilogue reveals that Cheyenne has become pregnant, despite her previous desire to not “bring someone into the world that would suffer how [she] did” (Tijan 434). Just like Anastasia and Jasmine, Cheyenne’s pregnancy is unplanned but welcomed and seems to complete the heroine’s HEA, despite all other achievements. Would adoption or fostering, or even choosing to not have children, somehow give the characters a less happy ending? Certainly not. However, all three authors employ the ultimate result of heteronormativity: reproduction. These athletes cannot possibly enjoy their HEA ending without passing on their athletically superior genetic material.

It is important to note that these books are all romance novels before they are sports fiction, so the emphasis on the love plot is expected and understandable. However, for elite and professional athletes such as those in these novels, their sport is a major facet of their lives, and it seems reductive to diminish their achievements to focus solely on their love lives. These endings facilitate the notion that coupledness (and in these cases, reproduction) is the defining proof that one has led a successful life (Roach 92). Pamela Regis suggests that the heroine's decision to marry the hero in a romance novel is "just one manifestation of her freedom" (15) but these mainstream sports romances tend to focus on the romantic HEA while ignoring the other highly impressive achievements of the characters. As evidenced by the queer sports romances selected for this study, there is room in these narratives to create a satisfying love plot while also celebrating athletes and their sports.

The chosen queer novels emphasise the sports to a greater extent than the chosen mainstream novels, closely interweaving the love plot and the sports plot with equal focus on both elements. Spangler's *Edge of Glory* (2017) leans heavily into the sports plot, delving into the technicalities and politics of both heroines' sports—although this may not always be appreciated or even desired by a romance reader, reading primarily for the love plot. Nevertheless, Spangler's *Edge of Glory* (2017) concludes with a balanced romantic/sporting "happy for now" (HFN) ending as both heroines become Olympic Champions in their sports and declare their love for one another. Quindlen's *She Drives Me Crazy* (2021) also weaves both sports plot and romance plot as Scottie learns to value cheerleading as a sport, falls in love with Irene, and wins her big game. Rose's *Catch and Cradle* (2021) centres around Hope and Becca, two lacrosse teammates who are dealing with a rule which states players cannot date teammates—a rule which acts as the barrier between the two heroines. In the end the team wins the championship title, an achievement which is just as celebrated as Hope and Becca's new relationship.

None of the HEA endings for the queer sports romances selected for this study (or perhaps more accurately in this case, HFN endings) involve marriage and children. Crucially, none of these books include an epilogue so it is impossible to know the future outcomes of the relationships. Perhaps they did marry and have children later in life, but the authors chose to omit this from their stories allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions.

While a HEA is a requirement of the genre, the industry definition of an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" ("About Romance", "About the Romance Genre") does leave some room for interpretation, as controversial as that statement may be. For the athlete hero or

heroine, their professional HEA can be just as satisfying and optimistic as their romantic one. In the case of the HEA for my protagonist, Jaz in *Ready to Roll*, I am choosing to focus on her sporting HEA over her romantic one. *Ready to Roll* is intended to be part of a series and Jaz will find her eventual romantic HEA in a subsequent book.

PART 2 - CREATIVE COMPONENT

2.1 Introduction

This creative component includes a selection of chapters for a queer sports romance provisionally titled, *Ready to Roll*. *Ready to Roll* is the story of Jayne Bannister, an 18 year old, closeted lesbian ice dancer from Yorkshire, England. Forced to dance with her brother Chris by her over-invested mother, Jayne prefers the freedom of figure skating, learning from her best friend Tara how to jump and spin. After the death of Jayne's late uncle John, a gay man who moved to Australia 20 years prior, the Bannisters inherit his estate and the family relocate to Sydney. Deciding that it is time for a change, Jayne resolves that now she is 18 she will quit ice dancing and find somewhere else to belong. One afternoon, while skating at an outdoor ice rink in Bondi, she catches the attention of Rhi Walker, an out-and-proud lesbian roller derby player. Jayne introduces herself as Jaz and Rhi invites her to the roller rink where she begins teaching her how to skate on wheels. The girls are instantly attracted to one another and begin dating in secret. This story is set in 2015, five years before the events of my first novel, *Roll With It* (Ravenscroft 2022). This creative component does not commence from the beginning of the manuscript. Instead, I have chosen to include chapters which best depict the themes explored through my research. For this reason, I have included context where necessary to set each scene in the narrative. The first 15,000 words of *Ready to Roll* were submitted for assessment for Macquarie University's Master of Creative Writing, which I undertook in 2022, and are included as Appendix 1.

2.2 Jaz and Chris Discuss Roller Derby

Context: The following chapter takes place after Jaz comes home from having spent the day with Rhi, the pair learning more about each other and sharing their first kiss. While together, Jaz told Rhi that she sold her ice skates to buy roller skates, and Rhi invited Jaz to attend her roller derby bout the next day. This chapter depicts my attempt to show the stereotypes which Jaz and her brother Chris have subconsciously developed through their limited world view and lack of exposure to the queer community. Chris is the only person other than Rhi to whom Jaz is "out".

I tried my best to keep a lid on my euphoria as I entered the house. Mam was probably going to grill me about where I'd been, and I didn't want to look like I'd had *too* good a time and provoke a full inquisition.

Creeping down the hall and into the living room, I was relieved to find only Chris, sitting on the lounge watching some movie, ankles crossed on the coffee table, a bowl of popcorn in his lap. As soon as he heard the floorboards creak under my feet, he looked over with a knowing smirk. "Where have *you* been, young lady?"

"Where are Mam and Dad?" I asked, my gaze shifting all over the place, just in case one of them was about to come bursting out from behind a pot-plant.

"Mam's at a church thing. I think Dad went to the pub."

I breathed out a sigh and felt the tension drop from my shoulders.

Chris grabbed a cushion in one large hand and lobbed it at me. "So, where've you been?"

I caught the cushion before it smacked me in the face. "Out."

"Lemme guess. The roller skating bird?"

My cheeks flared and I wondered if Chris could tell I'd been kissed. I shook the thought away and tossed the cushion back at him. "Her name's Rhi."

The corners of his mouth quirked up into a smug grin. "So, it *was* the roller skating bird."

"Don't call her that, ya bellend." I slumped down on the couch next to him and nicked some popcorn. "Pretty sure it was a date this time. And she invited me to her derby bout tomorrow."

Chris raised an eyebrow. "She better behave herself if she's going to be dating my little sister."

I had to physically stop my eyeballs from rolling into the back of my skull. I wasn't interested in the movie Chris was watching but I had nothing better to do. So, I sat with him, stealing his popcorn as New York City got blown up and subsequently saved for the umpteenth time in cinematic history.

One obnoxiously long action scene caused my mind to wander, and I turned to Chris. "Do you reckon I could play roller derby?"

Chris scoffed. "No."

“What? Why?”

“You’re too much of a girl!”

I screwed up my nose. “It’s a *girl’s* sport!”

“Yeah, but like. Aren’t the lasses who play roller derby more like ... you know?”

I folded my arms, amusement playing at the corner of my lips as I watched him squirm.

“No, I don’t know.”

“You know like ... lesbians.”

I rolled my eyes. “I *am* a lesbian, you pillock!”

“Yeah, but you’re not like a ... lesbi^{any} lesbian.”

“Oh my god.”

“You know what I mean!”

Of *course* I knew what he meant. I wasn’t a big, strong butch with an undercut and a wardrobe full of flannelette shirts.

“You don’t think I could take a hit?”

“I don’t think you could *throw* one. You’re too nice.”

“Well, I could be the one that zips through the pack and scores the points,” I said, falling back on my limited knowledge of roller derby.

“Don’t they usually pick, like ... a small person to do that?”

“Rude.”

“You’re nearly six-feet tall,” Chris pointed out. “There’s more of you to hit. Plus, they could just grab your big, long ponytail and deck ya.”

“Ah, that would be *very* illegal.”

Chris just shrugged. I should have known better than to have this conversation with a straight man.

I folded my feet under me and pouted. “I could throw a hit.”

Chris chuckled. “Whatever you say, Princess.”

I gritted my teeth, leaned over and shoved him as hard as I could.

He grunted and nearly spilled popcorn all over the lounge, but still he replied: “It’s like being hit by a gentle breeze.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Well, I’m going to Rhi’s bout tomorrow, so we’ll see.”

“Are you *actually* considering taking up roller derby?”

“Well, I want to do *something*! I’m bored!”

“You could always go back to the ice.”

I screwed up my nose. “No way. That’s too much time spent with Mam. The only upside to my retirement has been my freedom from that bitch.”

The B-word hung in the air like the resounding ring you get in your ears after an explosion.

Chris raised his eyebrows. “Woah.”

“Well, she *is* a bitch,” I said, my volume rising. “She’s a hypocrite, she’s manipulative, and her and Dad are the reason I can’t be happy. I’m *one* conversation away from becoming homeless. And now there’s this cute lass who’s *clearly* into me, but can I do anything about it?”

“I don’t think I want to know what you want to do about it ...”

“No, I can’t,” I said, ignoring the remark, “because even though I’m ridiculously happy when I’m with her, I come back *here* and I’m surrounded by Mam and her weird church stuff, and Dad and his liberal use of slurs, and the ghost of Uncle John reminding me that their hate drove him halfway across the world.”

Chris’s face fell. “I’m sorry.”

I sighed. “It’s not your fault. I just have to wait until I have the money to move out. Or until they die.”

“Oof.”

“What else am I supposed to do, Chris? Live on the street?”

“You’ve always got me, Jayney.”

“Yeah, I know.” Although I wasn’t sure whatever we could finagle together would be enough to get us a flat in Bondi. Not with his chip shop wage and me still unemployed.

“Oh, by the way,” I added, “I don’t want to be called Jayne anymore. It’s not me.”

“Well, what do you want to be called?”

I hugged my knees to my chest and fixed my gaze on the television. “Jaz.”

“Jaz.” Chris said, like he was testing out how it felt on his tongue. “Snazzy. I like it. Nice to meet you, Jaz.”

2.3 Jaz Attends Her First Derby Bout

Context: The following chapter continues directly from above. It begins with a depiction of Jaz’s perception that lesbians must look a certain stereotypical way in order to be validated. It then moves to the skating rink, where Jaz watches Rhi’s roller derby bout and questions whether roller derby, with its rejection of traditional femininity, might be both an appropriate sport for her as a queer athlete and a safe place for her to find community as a lesbian.

I spent all of Saturday buzzing around the house, riding the high of being asked on a date while also stressing about the prospect of actually *going* on one. Mam was at the ice rink all day, Dad had nicked off somewhere (probably the pub) and Chris had hockey practice, so there was no one around to question why I was ping-ponging off the walls, powered by pure nervous energy.

I decided to throw that energy into getting ready way too early, diving into my wardrobe and pulling out clothes, inspecting each item before frowning and tossing it onto the bed. What did people wear to roller derby bouts? Nothing too flash I assumed. But we *were* going out afterwards and I didn’t know what Rhi had planned. She’d probably be wearing activewear, or a uniform or something ... and she’d be all hot and sweaty ... I bit my lip. Now *there* was an image.

I threw down the oversized jumper I was holding and blew a frustrated raspberry. Nothing I owned looked ... how did Chris put it? ... *Lesbiany* enough?

A thought smacked me over the back of my head.

Chris!

I ran to his room, ignoring the mingling man-smell that was permeating from the pile of dirty clothes by his wardrobe and began rooting through his clean things. There it was! A blue flannelette shirt. It would flog me, but that might help the illusion. I threw it on, leaving the top few buttons open. I scrunched my hair and put on a tiny bit of natural make-up, so I didn’t look quite so pasty. I studied myself in the mirror.

There. I looked nice. Casual. And sufficiently gay.

I slid into the passenger seat of Rhi's lilac hatchback, enveloped by the warmth of the sun-soaked, broken air-conditioner interior. She greeted me with her signature smirk, the one that made it seem like she knew something nobody else did. Her blue hair was fixed into two low plaits which framed her face, and she had two black stripes painted on each of her plump, pink cheeks.

"You look nice," she said, her eyes raking over me.

"Thank you." I felt my face turn pink. "You look like you're off to the war."

"I am." Rhi laughed as she pulled away from the kerb, the muscles in her forearms flexing as she turned the steering wheel and made a very illegal U-turn.

I licked my lips and placed my hands on my lap, trying to discretely blot the sweat from my palms as my mind wandered off, thinking about other scenarios where having strong forearms might come in handy.

It was odd, walking into the rink for something other than a public session. Then, the place had been full of strangers, many looking just as lost as I'd felt, but now it was packed with people who considered it a second home, and who actually *knew* what they were doing.

The glossy, white painted concrete of the skating surface reminded me of crisp, freshly cut ice, but instead of being a giant freezer, the building was bathed in warmth as the sun streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side. Perspex barriers wrapped around the skating area where a few skaters were already rolling about. I gawked at them like they were fish in a bowl.

Rhi took my hand, pulling me out of my stupor, and led me to the carpeted grandstand where the other players were stretching, and strapping on their skates. My heart beat a little louder as I became hyper-aware of Rhi's fingers interlaced with mine.

I was holding hands with a *girl* in front of a whole bunch of people.

I knew it was irrational to worry—and I couldn't think of a single scenario that would result in either one of my parents ever finding out—but try telling *that* to eighteen years of religious indoctrination.

Rhi marched me past the skaters who I presumed were the opposition. The Western Sydney Sirens. They wore green and purple—the colours of the bruises I imagined they'd soon be inflicting on their enemies. We pulled up amongst Rhi's teammates, all clad in the black and red garb of the Randy Ravens.

“What's up, bitches?” she said, slapping high-fives with a few other skaters who greeted her in their own, equally colourful ways.

A couple of her teammates looked me up and down like they were trying to figure out who I was and why I was there.

“This is my friend, Jaz.” Rhi said, giving my hand a little squeeze.

A tall woman with broad shoulders and jet-black hair glanced down at our joined hands with a smirk. “Friend, huh?”

My body became rigid as I tensed under the stranger's gaze. She must have noticed because she laughed and patted me on the shoulder. “Relax, darl,” she said, “I'm just taking the piss.”

Rhi led me a little further up the grandstand to where the Ravens' supporters were sitting. “Sorry about Mel,” she said. “She's been dying for me to get a girlfriend after what happened with ... you know.”

“Girlfriend,” I said, traces of a wee smile starting to appear. “Is that what I am?”

Now it was Rhi's turn to blush. “Maybe.”

“Oi, Steve! Warm up in five!”

Surprisingly, Rhi responded to the call which had come from Mel. “One sec!”

I cocked my head. “Steve?”

“It's a derby thing, I'll explain later,” she said, bopping me on the nose with her index finger before running down the grandstand to put her skates on.

When Rhi left, she took my safety blanket with her and suddenly the anxiety that came with holding her hand in public paled in comparison to sitting alone on the grandstand. I played on my phone, hoping no one would speak to me. I wouldn't know what to say anyway. I'd never considered myself to be shy before, but here, surrounded by all these strong, fearless women, I felt an inch tall.

The teams finally took to the floor and began circling the orange plastic cones which marked out the track, whipping up a whirlwind of colour. The black and red of the Ravens, the green and purple of the Sirens, and a rainbow of vibrantly coloured hair which appeared to be a trend amongst the skaters. I caught sight of Rhi with her blue plaits poking out the bottom of her helmet. Over her helmet she wore a black fabric cover with a bright yellow star on the side. I knew that meant she'd be the first skater scoring the points, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what that position was called. Then I noticed her name on the back of her singlet top. It wasn't Walker, it was Stevie Kicks. I furrowed my brow and read the names of some of the other players' singlets.

Frida Kill-ho. Daenerys Tar-gay-ryen. Beyon-slay.

I looked at Rhi again.

Stevie Kicks ... Stevie Nicks? ... Rhi ... *Rhiannon*.

I smiled at the realisation. Derby alter-egos. Cute.

The only men out on the rink—or rather, in the whole building—were a couple of referees, dressed in black and white stripes with whistles slung around their necks. One of them blew his whistle and the skaters came together to form a huddle at one end of the track. Bodies of all shapes, sizes and colours jostled and fidgeted against each other like popcorn kernels getting ready to burst. Rhi and the star-helmet skater from the other team stood behind the pack, pumping themselves up by pounding their wrist-guards against their quadriceps.

There was a moment of stillness from Rhi and her opponent as the pack before them kept vibrating.

One of the referees blasted his whistle and Rhi took off a split second ahead of the Sirens' jammer.

That's right! They were called jammers!

Rhi shot into the pack without a moment's hesitation. One of the Sirens braced her hands against another's shoulders, using her as a human battering ram to keep Rhi from breaking through the pack. The two Sirens ground onto their toe stops, slamming their hips against Rhi, battling to keep her at bay. But Rhi was small and fast, and she kept twisting and turning and shoving until finally she managed to power past the pair. But her victory was short lived as she went flying into another human barricade, fighting with all her might to push her way through. Meanwhile, the other jammer was struggling to fend off a few of the larger Ravens.

Rhi finally managed to get past enough of the Sirens to be within reach of Mel, who had one hand stretched out behind her. A few more moments of tense jostling and Rhi grabbed Mel's hand. Mel pulled her out of the pack and with pure brute force, whipped her onto the track ahead.

Rhi was off!

The Ravens side of the crowd erupted into cheers and I joined in, screaming encouragement as Rhi powered around the track. One of the referees sped off after her, pointing at her with one hand, the other hand in the air.

By the time the other jammer popped out of the pack, Rhi had already lapped everyone and was back at the rear, breaking her way through once more. The Sirens were trying even harder than before to hold her off, but the speed she was carrying, combined with her agility and control was too much for them and she shot through like a little blue-haired bullet, popping out the other side and tapping her wrists against her hipbones. The referee blasted his whistle and the action slowed down. The Ravens' supporters cheered again and so did I, screaming for my apparently very talented girlfriend.

The rest of the bout continued in the same way. The pack would take off, the jammers would shove their way through, lap everyone, break through *again* and then smack their hips with their wrists. After about half an hour, I felt my focus begin to drift. Derby looked fun to play, but being relegated to spectator didn't thrill me. These people had something I wanted. The camaraderie, the team spirit. People were cheering and giving each other encouraging slaps on the back. Everyone was connected. Everyone was part of it. Everyone belonged. Derby looked intimidating and oftentimes painful, but the women were strong and powerful. It's what I wanted to be. It's what I *needed* to be if I was going to be Jaz, the new and improved me.

The bout ended with a Ravens victory, so I stood to my feet with the other spectators and cheered as loudly as I could, tamping down the strange feeling of envy that watching the bout had stirred in me. The Ravens and the Sirens rolled past each other, exchanging humble high-fives before scooting off the floor and taking their skates off. Rhi disappeared into the changerooms and re-emerged a little later, showered and dressed, her face fresh and clean. All traces of war paint were gone and her blue hair hung in damp curls around her shoulders.

She gave me a grin that kicked off a stirring in my stomach. "Did you have fun?"

"I did," I said, catching a smile off her, "but I think I actually would have ... preferred to be playing."

Rhi's grin grew even larger. "I was hoping you might say that."

“Oi Rhi, you coming to Bee’s tonight?” Mel asked as she walked by.

“Sorry dude, I have a date.”

Mel smirked, glancing between me and Rhi. “No worries. Have a good one.”

Then she strode off, skate bag slung over her shoulder.

I turned to Rhi. “So, it’s officially a date, is it?”

Rhi winked. “Was there ever any doubt?”

2.4 Jaz Plays Roller Derby for the First Time

Context: The following chapter takes place after Jaz and Rhi have officially become girlfriends. Jaz still worries about her parents finding out she is a lesbian, even more so after an alcohol-fuelled confrontation with her father, who has always been aggressively homophobic and who was one of the reasons why Jaz’s late uncle moved to Australia in the first place.

Jaz struggles with being affectionate in public and this occasionally takes a toll on their new relationship, as Rhi has never had to hide her identity before. In the hope that it might help Jaz’s situation, Rhi invited Jaz to move into her place, an offer Jaz accepted. Jaz’s parents were not happy about the move; however, they are still under the impression that she has moved in with a platonic friend. Rhi has been teaching Jaz more roller skating skills and is currently preparing her to start Fresh Meat, an entry-level program for roller derby.

This chapter depicts my attempt to show Jaz’s desire to fit into the queer roller derby world, despite it not truly being for her. Her desire to be accepted into the roller derby community reflects her stereotypical belief that she must behave a certain way in order to be taken seriously as a lesbian.

Roller skating outdoors on the footpath was completely different to roller skating in the rink. I may have been new to this whole thing, but at least in the rink the surface was smooth and clean, and I could start to feel my muscle memory from years of ice skating kicking in. Out on the footpath was a different story. Cracks, bumps, stones, sand blown up from the beach ... it was the roller skating equivalent of ice skating on the lake back in England, only more terrifying because I was still new to wheels and spent most of the time baby-gazelleing it even when there weren’t any obstructions.

Rhi made it look easy, cruising along, stealthily avoiding the imperfections in the concrete. Meanwhile, I was fumbling down the footpath, too preoccupied with avoiding debris to really get any speed up. Every so often I'd hit a patch of sand and feel my wheels start to slide out from underneath me, and with no protective gear I had the added mental burden of trying to avoid breaking my neck.

"You just need to bend your knees more!" Rhi called out.

I gave her a pointed look. "Oh, is that all?"

Rhi laughed. "You're doing great."

"I hate this," I muttered. "Give me the rink any day!"

"Sure, Princess." Rhi smirked. "Typical figure skater. You gotta be tougher than this if you want to play derby."

That's right, I was doing this so I could play derby. I'd almost forgotten, considering how I was struggling to even stay vertical. It was much easier to say I wanted to play when I was safely grounded on two wheel-less feet.

"How am I supposed to play derby when I can't even skate?"

"You're better than you give yourself credit for," Rhi said. "Besides, you don't need any experience for Fresh Meat. They'll teach you as you go."

That didn't exactly instill me with confidence. Nevertheless, I narrowed my eyes at Rhi, bent my knees more and took some stronger pushes, determined to not look ridiculous. I gained some momentum and we hit a clear patch of footpath. Finally, I was able to relax and roll for a bit.

"That's it! Now you're getting somewhere," Rhi called out as she snaked along the footpath backwards, a few feet in front of me.

I felt better, but still a far cry from the Venice Beach lasses I'd seen skating on Instagram. "I can't imagine doing this in a bikini."

Rhi pumped her eyebrows. "Oh, *I* can."

I gave her a look but failed to fight off a smile.

It didn't take long for my legs to grow weary. Skating on the rough surface took up a lot more energy than skating in the smooth rink did. We crashed down, side by side on the grass of the nearby park, under the shade of a tree, and I began unlacing my skates.

"That," I said, pulling off one boot, "was terrifying."

"You did great," Rhi replied, taking a long swig of water. "Are you excited for Fresh Meat?"

"Just the fact that you call it *Fresh Meat* ..."

Rhi laughed.

"I am ..." I continued, "although I'm more nervous than anything else."

"You'll be fine. I'll be there to make sure no one flattens you." A cheeky grin slid across her face. "At least not on your first day."

"Gee, thanks."

"Look, Jaz." She placed a hand on my leg. "Everyone is really nice off the track, even if they are hard asses on it. And Reggie is a great coach."

"I know it was my idea to sign up, but I'm worried I'm gonna be completely out of my depth. I'm so new. And I'm not that much of a hard arse *regardless* of my proximity to a track."

"I'm telling you, you'll smash it," Rhi said. "Plus, the derby community is *super* gay. No one's gonna judge you for being who you are. They might judge you if you're a wuss, but not if you're a lesbian."

I chuckled. That *was* the main drawcard after all. Derby was going to offer me a place at the table in the queer community. Although, I still didn't quite feel like I was *part* of the queer community. I recalled what Chris had said about me not being a "lesbian lesbian". I knew what he meant, but with my long blonde hair and my mostly feminine wardrobe I didn't exactly look like what most people pictured when they thought of a lesbian—except maybe certain gross straight men, for whom "lesbian" was nothing more than a porn category. It wasn't like you had to be gay to play derby, but would the others think I was just an imposter? A straight girl cosplaying as queer for attention? Lord knows that was the last thing I wanted.

I also didn't know whether I was ready to say the words, "Hi, I'm Jaz and I'm a lesbian" out loud in front of a bunch of people I didn't know. Every time I thought about doing it, I saw

my mother's hardened face, her eyes like daggers, her poisonous lips spitting out the twisted platitudes she let control her life. And I hated myself for still letting her control mine.

Friday was the big day. My protective derby gear arrived on Thursday afternoon, and a tiny part of me had been disappointed that I was out of excuses to avoid going to Fresh Meat. Even the name terrified me. But the fact that Chris had been so adamant that I wasn't a derby girl spurred me on to prove him wrong.

The rink seemed bigger when Rhi and I walked in. Last time I was just a spectator. This time it was *me* going into the Perspex fishbowl, nowhere to hide, all eyes on me. Was I even ready for this? I'd only roller skated a handful of times. Surely that made me a liability. But Rhi had insisted that they'd teach me on the go.

"Besides, no one is going to knock you over on your first day." Rhi had reminded me when I'd told her I was worried. But that did little to abate my concerns. Especially when I saw how tough the other so-called "Fresh Meat" skaters looked.

I was definitely the freshest.

A group of skaters had already congregated on the grandstand. Some were lacing up skates, others were milling about and chatting. Most of them were shorter than me, but they were more solidly built than I was, and they all looked like they'd be able to knock me over by looking at me the wrong way. I spotted the coach, Reggie—whose fire-engine red hair shone like a beacon—down one end of the rink with a clipboard. She too looked like someone I wouldn't want to cross in a dark alley.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I muttered, moving a little closer to Rhi's side.

She took my hand and squeezed it. "You're going to be fine."

Rhi didn't know many of the Fresh Meat skaters. She was planning on doing her own independent training with some of the more senior Ravens, so we bypassed the other newbies and set ourselves down beside Mel.

"Steve!" Mel greeted Rhi. "Ah, you bought your new girlfriend!"

It was bizarre hearing the G-word used in reference to me (almost as bizarre as hearing Mel called Rhi Steve). I liked it, but only because I knew that the derby league was a safe space. I can't imagine I would have felt quite so relaxed if I'd just walked into my mother's ice dancing

class, where skating a romantic routine with your brother is considered less weird than skating one with a girl.

My hands trembled as I laced up my skates and strapped on my protective gear, something I'd never worn in my life. Mam used to make snide comments about figure skaters who wore protective gear, especially ones who wore crash pants. She used to say that they gave you a fat arse and skaters should learn to fall and suck it up like they did in the old days.

My legs felt heavy as I stepped onto the rink, my nerves turning my muscles to lead. I rolled around a bit, trying to get used to the feeling of wheels under foot once more, but I felt like I was skating through tar. I bent my knees, bobbing up and down and trying to wake my legs up. As my muscle memory started to do its thing, my pushes became stronger and smoother. Still not as confident as they were on ice, but enough to get by. Hopefully.

“All right fresh meat!” Reggie’s voice drew all the skaters into the centre of the floor and we formed a circle around her.

I glanced about, taking in the other skaters as Reggie explained how the class was going to run. Only some of her instructions fully penetrated my brain as I drifted in and out of focus, a little preoccupied by the fear of being flattened. Thankfully, it seemed that most of the class was going to be spent going over the individual skills required to play the game. At least I wouldn't have to throw any hits today ... or be thrown into a scrimmage right off the bat.

“Oh, and this is Jaz.” Reggie’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. She was gesturing at me and wearing a sly grin on her face. “She’s brand new today so go easy on her.”

Goddammit.

I'd been hoping to fly under the radar, but as I stood there in my derby skates and my chunky black protective gear, I felt like a toddler playing dress up in their parents' clothes.

We began with the basics as Reggie sent us off to skate a few warmup laps. I immediately noticed that my natural skating stance was completely different to everyone else's. The others were bent forward at the waist, deep in their knees and charging like bulls around the track.

“Jaz!” Reggie called out. “You need to get lower! Bend your knees, lower your body! Lower! You look like a bloody figure skater.”

Well, yeah, there's a reason for that.

I bent my knees and stuck my hips out behind me. I'd spent nearly ten years being told to stand up straight, knees bent with my hips tucked under me. This was going to be a habit of a lifetime to break.

After our warmup laps, Reggie sent us off to work on our skills: turns, little jumps, different ways to stop. I was already familiar with the skills—I'd been doing them on ice since I was a kid—but apparently I was reverting to my ice days *too* much because Reggie wouldn't stop yelling at me for skating like a figure skater.

"Get lower, Jaz!" Her face was almost the colour of her hair, she was so fed up with shouting at me.

I watched the others. It was clear that my decade on ice had given me a leg up on them, skating wise, but my derby-specific skills left a lot to be desired. Plus, the others were fearless. That was made very clear when Reggie said we were going to end the session by practicing our falling and they immediately started throwing their bodies on the ground.

Sure, I'd learned how to fall safely as a beginner, but I'd spent my entire skating career up until now trying to *avoid* falling, and now it had to become a part of my skill set. I should have known. This was a contact sport after all, there were going to be falls. And it wasn't going to be like accidentally getting dropped by Chris. It would be more like strong, fierce women, baying for my blood, knocking all lanky six feet of me flying.

Reggie explained to me how to fall on both kneepads and wrist guards, making sure to slide upon landing. I did my best to do as she asked, but I just ended up carefully dropping to my knees. I winced at the impact through my kneepads.

"Come on, Princess," Reggie said, smirking. "Pull the stick out of your arse. Really throw yourself."

I chewed the inside of my cheek and tried again. Again, the fall was pathetic.

"Come on!" Reggie said, folding her arms and raising one pierced eyebrow at me. "If you can't throw yourself on the ground, how do you expect to be able to take it when somebody *else* throws you to the ground."

There it was. She'd just verbalised the very thing I'd been thinking the entire time. And swirling amongst my thoughts was Chris's voice. *You're too much of a girl! You're too nice. You're not a lesbian lesbian.*

And if I'd learned one thing from my first day as Fresh Meat, it was that he just might be right.

2.5 Jaz Quits Roller Derby and Discovers Artistic Roller Skating

Context: The following chapter depicts a turning point in Jaz's character arc. She discovers that she will never enjoy roller derby, regardless of its inclusivity, which is difficult for her to accept as she feels like a "bad" lesbian for refusing to reject femininity. It also depicts her discovery of artistic roller skating, which reawakens her love of figure skating, leading her to question her stereotypical beliefs regarding gender, sexuality and sports.

As fun as skating recreationally with Rhi was, and as quickly as I was improving on wheels, derby practice had not been getting any easier. I spent my second training session once again being yelled at by Reggie for everything I was doing wrong. Skating too upright, not getting low enough, being too hesitant to throw myself onto the concrete floor (shocking).

The third Friday, Reggie tossed me into a practice bout. I felt like I was going to need a vomit bucket as I waited for Reggie's whistle. When the shrill sound finally split the air, everything started moving in fast-forward. I white-knuckled it through the first few moments, before failing to stop the jammer and getting knocked flat on my back by a lass half my height and twice my width. I scrambled to my feet, only to get taken out by the jammer who was powering back through the pack. It was like being pommelled by white caps as I desperately tried to avoid drowning, until eventually I ended up at the bottom of the ocean.

Or more accurately, the bottom of a four-person pile-up.

Reggie looked down at me with her lips tight and her hands on her hips. "See? That's what happens when you don't bend your knees. Your centre of gravity is too high and you're easier to knock over."

Oh sure, it was my knees that were the problem and not the fact that I was just barrelled into by the human equivalent of a lorry.

My ego was almost as bruised as my body. The next day as I struggled out of bed, it felt like I'd fallen down several flights of stairs. But I kept going back for more like a masochist.

This was going to be my thing. It *had* to be. It was the community I'd been looking for and I wasn't about to throw it away because I was too much of a princess.

But eight weeks and fifty billion more bruises in and I was singing a different tune.

I was tired. Tired of crashing into the ground. Tired of skating in a pack, hustling and bustling with skaters who were way stronger than me. Tired of waking up covered in random purple, green and blue battle scars that somebody else put there. Tired of trying to be this girl.

She wasn't me.

And I just didn't get it.

Derby should have been my scene. It was welcoming and accepting of people like me. I'd overheard some of the other queer skaters talking about how derby saved them. How it gave them a family and a place to belong ... so what the hell was wrong with me? I'd never felt more like an imposter in my life, and I'd *literally* been a closeted lesbian in church.

I knew that quitting was the right decision, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Rhi would be disappointed in me. There were several moments over the course of the ninth week when I found myself *almost* telling her. I'd feel the words hovering on the tip of my tongue but then my mouth would get all dry and I'd choke on them. She clearly loved sharing this part of herself with me, and I was worried I would break her heart when I told her. But the prospect of disappointing Rhi was still less horrifying than the prospect of being flattened weekly.

It was as we drove over to Randwick for what I decided would be my final training session that I finally forced myself to spit out the words.

"Rhi?"

"Yeah, babe?"

I took a deep breath. "Look, I just wanted to tell you that ... I think this is going to have to be my last Fresh Meat."

She glanced across the car at me. "For real?"

I fiddled with my hands in my lap. "Yeah."

"Why? I thought you were having fun."

I had to hold myself back from scoffing. "Fun? It's been a nightmare!"

"Seriously?"

How had she not noticed that I'd spent the better part of every training session flat on my back?

She glanced at me again. "You look like you're having fun when we go skating down by the beach."

"I *am* having fun when we do *that*. I enjoy *skating*. I just don't really ... like derby."

Rhi stared ahead and pursed her lips, tapping the steering wheel with her index finger and looking agitated.

"It's not that derby isn't cool." I floundered, trying desperately to provide a better explanation. "It *is* cool. And I think it's cool that *you* do it. It's just that ... I spent ten years trying *not* to fall and now it seems like that's all I do. Like, when I was ice skating, I got to practice all these amazing skills and tricks and with derby I'm just like ... going around and around in circles and falling over."

Rhi snapped her head around, and even though I couldn't see her eyes through her dark glasses, I could tell from her furrowed brow she was glaring at me.

"I guess derby players aren't *skilled* enough for you then," she said, her tone cold and bitter as she turned her attention back to the road.

My chest constricted in a panic. "That ... that's not what I meant. It just ... isn't for me."

"What, do you think you're too *good* for derby? *I'm* a derby player and I taught you everything you know on roller skates."

"Well, I mean ..." I stammered, my heart racing, "there were a lot of things I already knew from ice ..."

"Well, why don't you go back to the ice then, Jaz?" She snapped. "Go back to your mother who hates you if you think you're too good for derby."

I could feel the tears start to prick at my eyes. "That's not what I think at all. I just don't think it's my thing. I think it's great that it's *your* thing, but we don't need to always do the same things, right?"

"You said it yourself, Jaz," Rhi said, her knuckles whitening on the steering wheel. "To you, derby is just going around and around in circles and falling over. Way to downplay the community that's kept me sane for years. Way to shit all over my achievements."

A heavy silence rang through the car. I'd put my foot in it, and I knew it. I chewed on my lower lip to stop it from quaking, and we drove the rest of the way to the rink without speaking.

Rhi barely acknowledged my existence for the entire training session and when I grabbed Reggie at the end to tell her I was quitting, she looked unsurprised but pissed off.

And I couldn't help but wonder if Rhi had told her what I'd said.

I shoved my sweaty derby gear into my bag for the last time and flung the bag over my shoulder. I was relieved that it was finally over, but still I felt hollow.

Rhi had to work that afternoon and I'd been planning on getting the bus home alone anyway, so I spent a while longer in the shower, having a little cry. Fortunately, by the time I was done, the changeroom had cleared out so I didn't have to worry about anyone witnessing my walk of shame. I really thought I'd done it, found something to fill the void that had been plaguing me since I left my heart back in England, skating on the lake with Tara. But no. It had just been a case of me forcing something I hated because I wanted, so badly, to find my place in the world. I trudged out of the changeroom and back into the rink area, feeling like I'd been repeatedly kicked in the gut. And then I saw something.

I'd never hung around so long after derby before, and maybe it was fate that I chose that day to stay back and have a shower-cry, because what I saw out on the rink made me freeze in my tracks.

Two skaters. A tall blonde lad and a short redheaded girl, both strong, lean and athletic, wearing matching black spandex training outfits. They were standing in the middle of the rink, taking direction from a middle-aged woman with greying-blond hair and an animated face, who appeared to speak with her entire body.

And they were all wearing figure skates. But with *wheels*.

I stood glued to the spot, caught by the lure of their power and speed as they took off, hand in hand, skating a big arc around the rink. The lad pulled the girl in front of him as they both continued speeding backwards. He placed his hands on her hips, and she braced her hands against his. She stretched one leg behind her, and he bent his knees, gripping her tighter as they wound up into something which would no doubt be spectacular. She hit her back inside edge, then her toe-stop, and then he launched her into the air. I held my breath as she took flight,

rotating three times and landing with the satisfying clunk of wheels against concrete. It was a triple Salchow. Or rather, a throw triple Salchow—something that pair skaters did on ice.

Wait.

I *knew* this sport.

It *was* pair skating! But instead of ice, they were on concrete. Instead of blades they were on wheels. But it was the same! I must have looked like I was catching flies the way my mouth was hanging open.

I sank down onto the grandstand, unable to pull my eyes away from the pair, transfixed as they moved between steely focus on their training and unadulterated joy, chatting and laughing with their coach and each other. They were like a little family.

Well, not like *my* family, but probably like *someone's* family.

The girl caught my eye the most, of course. But it wasn't because she was pretty—although she was—it was because of something else. Something almost indescribable. She had an open, kind face and a smile that I imagined could settle anyone's nerves. She had the sort of magnetism that made me feel like she could be my best friend, which I know sounds ridiculous. I felt like a stalker, sitting there gawking at their training session. I hoped they didn't mind, because I needed to see more. I needed to know everything about this sport.

After a while, the coach dismissed the girl before grabbing the lad and fixing his body position. The girl floated across the rink and ended up beside the barrier, just across from where I was sitting. She grabbed a bottle of water and took a swig. Then she noticed me staring.

I dropped my head, hoping I wasn't about to get shouted at for watching a private training session.

“Hi!”

I looked back up. Her cheeks were red and flushed with exercise, and she seemed to glow from the inside out as she smiled at me.

“Hiya,” I managed to say, a little surprised that she'd spoken to me.

“Are you a derby girl?”

“Um, I was. I just quit.”

She tilted her head to one side. “How come?”

“Not for me. I don’t like knocking people over.”

The girl let out an airy laugh which made me smile in return.

“Fair enough,” she said. “At least in artistic you only have to worry about injuring *yourself*.”

As if on cue, her partner rolled over beside her and took a drink from his own bottle. She glanced at him and added: “Unless you end up accidentally kicking your partner during a lift dismount.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Didn’t want kids anyway,” he replied, shifting uncomfortably, but looking amused, nevertheless.

She winced. “Sorry. You know I’d never hurt you on purpose.” Then she turned to me with a smirk. “He’s too good. That’s why I keep him around.”

“You keep me around?” He replied with a smirk of his own. “I’m sought-after. If you dropped me today, I’d have a new partner by tomorrow.”

The girl rolled her eyes, but it was clear she was trying not to smile even wider. “You know I’d never drop you. Shame I can’t say the same for you.”

“I haven’t dropped you in years.”

“You dropped me last week.”

“Ah no, I caught you.”

There wasn’t an ounce of bitterness in their bickering. In fact, it seemed kind of flirty, and I felt like a bit of a third wheel.

“You two are really good,” I blurted out, breaking them out of their verbal sparring.

The girl’s face lit up again. “Thank you!”

“This is figure skating, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Well, we tend to call it artistic roller skating, but it’s pretty close to figure skating.”

“I had no idea people did figure skating on roller skates.”

The lad chimed in. “Not many people do.”

The girl held up her hands like she was about to perform a magic trick. “I like to call it the most beautiful sport you’ve *never* seen,” she said with a flourish.

“I used to be an ice dancer before I moved here,” I said, feeling at ease opening up to them.

“People dance on roller skates too!” the girl exclaimed.

“I never really *liked* dance, but I had a friend who taught me all the jumps and spins. That’s what I *really* wanted to do.”

“How did you end up playing roller derby?” the girl asked.

“My ... friend plays. And she brought me along.”

“Well, if you’re ever interested in giving artistic a go you could always chat with Sandra,” the girl said, throwing down the suggestion like a gauntlet.

I glanced over her shoulder at the coach who was rolling back out onto the rink. Things were moving at lightspeed, but something about this felt right. My gut was telling me to go for it. Even if I ended up being rubbish, at least I might make a couple of friends.

“You know what, I might actually take you up on that.” Saying it out loud made me feel even better about it.

“Awesome!” The girl clapped her hands and beamed. “Are you busy this afternoon? If you hang around for another hour, we can go get coffee or something.”

I grinned like an idiot. “Sure. That’d be great!”

“Awesome!” she said again, before shaking her head as if she’d forgotten something, which of course, she had. “I’m Ainslie, by the way. And this is James.”

“I’m Jaz.”

“Nice to meet you, Jaz.”

“All right, you two!” the coach called out. “Long program! Let’s go!”

Ainslie pushed herself off the barrier and drifted away backwards. “Chat to you after?”

I nodded, trying to remain as cool as possible while internally bouncing off the walls.

The pair took their first position and when the music began so did the magic. They began their movements, two bodies moving as one, like they could read each other’s minds. And their chemistry... well ... I felt like I was intruding on an intimate moment, but I couldn’t look away.

That, combined with the way they spoke to each other, made me think they must be a couple. The idea produced an involuntary pang of disappointment somewhere deep inside me and I shook *that* thought away as quickly as I could.

It was bloody frightening how easy it was for me to develop a crush on a cute girl on skates.

An hour seemed to fly by as I watched Ainslie and James, and I could have sat there all day. When they came off the floor, they dragged their things over to where I was sitting and joined me on the grandstand.

“You’re not originally from around here, are you?” Ainslie said, unlacing her skates.

“I’m from England. Up north. I’ve only been here about six months.”

A look of recognition passed across James’s face. “My brother said he’d met an English guy who was new on the hockey team. Any relation?”

“My brother, Chris,” I said. “Who’s *your* brother?”

“Jason Sunderland?”

“Small world.”

James laughed. “Yeah, the skating world especially so.”

“I can’t believe artistic never came up between them,” I said. “Chris used to be my dance partner. Although, I suppose he probably didn’t want to advertise that to the hockey lads.”

“Ice dancing with your brother. How fun!” Ainslie said.

James scoffed. “Spoken like a true only-child.”

I traded a knowing look with him. “Yeah, fun’s one word for it.”

The pair finished taking off their skates and placed them in their bags.

“We’re just gonna get changed and then we can all grab coffee, yeah?” Ainslie said.

I smiled. “Sounds good.”

The two disappeared off to the change rooms and I stayed with their skate bags, feeling a little awkward now that I was alone. Across the rink, the coach was packing down the music box. There’d been a few moments when she’d glanced in my direction which made me nervous. I silently prayed that Ainslie and James would hurry back, but before they did, the coach rolled

over and stepped off the rink. She put one foot up on the grandstand beside me and began unlacing her skates.

“So, you’ve discovered the world of artistic,” she said, a trace of a smile on her face.

I nodded.

“Careful,” she said, “it’ll suck you in.”

“I just might let it.”

“You skated before?”

“Former ice dancer, then I played roller derby for a minute. But I always wanted to be a singles skater.”

“You know your jumps and spins?”

“I had a friend teach me back in England. I could do all my doubles.”

Sandra raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

Suddenly, Ainslie’s voice cut through the conversation as she came bounding over. “What do you say, Sandra? You want another skater?”

Sandra pulled her skates off and tossed them into her bag, glancing at me as if she was sizing me up. “If she wants to work hard.”

“I’d work my arse off!” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I blushed, and clamped my mouth shut. “Sorry.”

Sandra smiled. “Don’t apologise. It’s what I like to hear. I run an open group class every Monday afternoon from four-thirty. You’re welcome to join in if you like.”

I could feel my entire body filling with fire as all coherent thought left my brain. “That’d be amazing!”

Ainslie was beaming. Sandra looked like she was plotting something. I was about to implode.

“What’s your name?” Sandra asked.

“Jaz,” I replied. “Jaz Bannister.”

Sandra flung her skate bag over her shoulder and gave me a smile. “I look forward to seeing you around then, Jaz Bannister.”

2.6 Jaz and Rhi Argue About Artistic Roller Skating

Context: This chapter takes place after Jaz has spent the afternoon getting to know Ainslie and James, as well as meeting their other friend Lucy. Together, they taught her about artistic roller skating. In a moment alone, Jaz came out to Ainslie. This chapter depicts my attempt to show the stereotypes Rhi has developed regarding feminine-presenting women in aesthetic sports. It also critiques the traditional, heteronormative views held by some of the artistic skaters toward derby skaters.

Discovering artistic roller skating had felt like finding water in the desert as I gasped my final breaths, parched and choking. And hanging out with Ainslie and the others had been a welcome distraction from the fight with Rhi, but I could only put off going home for so long.

I arrived back a little after eight and slunk down the hall towards our room, steeling myself for whatever was going to happen. Inside, Rhi was on the bed, big light off, illuminated only by the bedside lamp and the telly as she played a video game. She glanced up as I walked in, looking surprisingly sheepish.

We locked eyes and an uncomfortable silence hung thick in the air between us. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out.

Just when I thought the silence was going to create a black hole and suck the entire universe in, Rhi spoke.

“Hey.” She tossed the game controller to the side. She sounded non-confrontational, thankfully.

I took a deep breath. “Hiya,” I replied on an exhale.

Another silence.

She may not have seemed confrontational, but the tension was still palpable.

I pushed past it, forcing myself to speak. “How was work?”

Rhi sighed. “Jaz, I’m sorry.”

My stomach lurched and my heart hammered against my ribs. How was that sentence going to end?

“I’m sorry I was unreasonable, let’s not fight anymore,” or “I’m sorry ... but I’m breaking up with you.”

“I’m sorry for this morning,” she said. “It was stupid to pick a fight over you not wanting to play derby. So, so stupid.”

Instantly, I felt the pressure on my shoulders begin to lift. I placed my bag down beside the wardrobe and moved towards the bed. “It’s not stupid. You just wanted to share it with me.”

“Yeah, but just because it’s my thing doesn’t mean it’s yours.” She moved the game controller out of the way and patted the duvet beside her. “I can’t force you to enjoy something that isn’t up your alley.”

I climbed onto the bed and snuggled into her side, wrapping one arm around her shoulders and breathing in the woody scent of her shampoo. The anxiety that had been churning my stomach for hours was finally settling as she relaxed into my side and drew lazy circles on my thigh with her fingers.

“Speaking of things up my alley,” I said, “I actually ... discovered this thing today.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you heard of artistic roller skating?”

Her fingers stopped drawing circles and her body stiffened under my arm. “Sure have.”

“Well, I met these skaters—and their coach—and they were awesome, and so nice, and they told me all about artistic. The coach even said I could come to a class, and it looks just like figure skating really, but on wheels and ...”

I was so caught up in my excitement it took me a moment to realise she was trying to wriggle away from me.

“So, are you gonna go?” she asked, freeing herself from my embrace, sitting up and swinging her legs off the side of the bed.

I sat up a little straighter, her tension rubbing off on me and causing the anxiety to flare back up again. “I was planning to.”

“Cool.” She stood and walked across the room to the dresser, aimlessly fiddling with a Star Wars figurine that sat on top of it.

I frowned. I was getting annoyed now. “Well, you don’t have to sound so happy for me.”

Rhi spun around to face me, a storm cloud covering her features. “Well, I’m sorry I’m not throwing a party to celebrate you going to the dark side.”

Her voice echoed in my ears and my chin nearly fell into my lap. “What?”

“*Artistic?* Really?” She spat out the words like they tasted bitter in her mouth. “I thought you were over the whole figure skating thing.”

“Well, I was over the *ice* thing because I wanted to stay as far away from my mother as possible, but I didn’t know *roller* was an option.”

Rhi rolled her eyes and scoffed, turning back to the figurine on the dresser.

Then a realisation hit me like a lorry.

My stomach clenched.

It was my turn to swing my legs around and sit on the edge of the bed. “Why didn’t *you* tell me about artistic?”

“Why would I?”

“Well,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “you knew how much I loved figure skating. And how good I was at it. And how the only thing keeping me from doing it was having to move in the same circles as my mother. Surely you can see how artistic might have been something I’d be interested in?”

Rhi turned back to me. “It’s not my job to syphon ex-figure skaters into artistic, Jaz. And I thought derby was something fun we could do together. I didn’t realise you were going to hate it so fucking much.”

“I didn’t hate it! It just wasn’t for me! And I was rubbish at it anyway!” My fingertips ached as I gripped the edge of the mattress. “I *wasn’t* rubbish at figure skating. I *loved* it and you *knew* I loved it. So why did it never occur to you to mention that I had other options?”

Rhi let out a guttural groan that rattled my bones. “Because I don’t *like* artistic skaters, okay!”

A knot formed in my stomach and immediately began to tighten. “Why not?”

She sighed. “Well ... not *all* artistic skaters, I guess. But as a rule, they tend to be ...”

“What?”

“A bunch of bitches.”

My eyes went wide. “Wow.”

I’d only met three artistic skaters and they’d all been lovely.

Rhi groaned. “I’m sorry, okay. It’s just ... I’ve been burned before.”

That sparked a memory. Something she’d said the second time we’d hung out. She’d mentioned an ex-girlfriend from the rink who’d swapped clubs and I’d assumed she meant another derby girl but ...

“Your ex ...”

“Was an artistic skater.” She finished the sentence for me. “Yeah.”

“What happened?”

She leaned against the dresser again, folding her arms and staring at the ceiling with a sigh. “It was a fucking mess.”

I gave her a look, silently pressing her to keep talking.

“We met at the rink, obviously,” she said. “I didn’t think there were any lesbian artistic skaters at the club. They were all so ... girly-girl. She wasn’t closeted. Or at least she wasn’t when we were out and about. But at the rink it was a different story. I figured she was trying to keep a low profile. You know, that sport is run by dinosaurs.”

I glanced down at my hands, feeling uncomfortable. I knew exactly what she meant. Figure skating was one of the most traditional sports that I knew. You’d never see a pair team, or an ice dance team made up of two women. Hell, women weren’t even allowed to wear *pants* on ice until recently, and I figured artistic was probably the same.

“Dani was awesome when she wasn’t around the artistic skaters, but the second she stepped into that rink it was like I didn’t exist,” Rhi continued, her gaze unfixed and refusing to meet my eye. “I was fine with keeping things quiet, so she didn’t have to advertise her queerness beyond what she was comfortable with, but ...”

Rhi’s head dropped, and she sighed.

“What happened?” I asked.

Rhi looked up at me. “Let’s just say that it became pretty clear, pretty quick that she was more ashamed of dating a derby skater than she was of dating a girl.”

I furrowed my brow. “Why?”

“Why do you think? It’s a rich, white, *straight* girl sport.”

I must have still looked confused because she let out a dramatic groan.

“They’re snobs, Jaz!” she said. “And they think they’re better than us.”

Ainslie, James and Lucy hadn’t *seemed* like that. Although I *had* only spoken to them for a few hours.

“So, what happened?” I pressed.

Rhi let out a frustrated half-laugh, half-scoff. “What *didn’t* happen.” She folded her arms across her chest, hugging herself as she studied the floor in front of her. “I was in the changeroom after practice one night. Artistic was coming in after us and I overheard Dani and one of her friends talking and joking about how all derby skaters do is skate around in circles and fall over.”

My heart plummeted. Isn’t that kind of what I’d said too?

Rhi continued. “Then Dani’s friend said that derby players are all a bunch of dykes who only play so they can cop a feel of other girls.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. I hadn’t heard that word in *years*, long before I ever realised it could be applied to me. Hearing it now made me nauseous.

“Did Dani say anything?” I asked.

Rhi gave me a pointed look. “That’d be a big fat no. She laughed and said that we all needed to go back to Learn to Skate classes so we could be taught properly.”

“Then what happened?”

“I confronted her. It got kind of heated. She denied we ever dated and ended up telling her coach I’d been harassing her. Luckily for *me*, there’d been another artistic skater in the changeroom who’d overheard what she said and vouched for me. Then her coach got pissed at her for causing drama. Her reputation got pretty fucked up after that, so she ended up changing clubs. *Obviously*, we broke up.”

I took a deep breath. It was a lot to process. I stood up and walked to her, placing a hand on her arm. “I’m so sorry, Rhi. But you know that was just one shitty person, right? Not *every*

artistic skater is going to be like that. What about the one who vouched for you?” God, I hoped it was Ainslie or Lucy.

Rhi looked up at me, sadness clouding her pretty brown eyes. “Jaz, it’s ingrained in their culture. What they do is *incredibly* difficult and *incredibly* impressive—I’ll give them that—but boy, do they *know* it. They see themselves as like, the ... queens of skating. The gatekeepers of good technique. They go on Instagram and they come into peoples’ comment sections just to tell them they’re doing stuff wrong ...”

“Has that happened to you?”

“Frequently.”

“But you’re a *great* skater.”

Rhi laughed a humourless laugh. “I’m sure your new friends would probably say otherwise.”

I squeezed her arm. “You taught me everything I know on roller skates, remember?”

“You said it yourself,” Rhi said. “You were an ice skater for ten years. You were already predisposed to being awesome at it.”

I took her hands in mine and laced my fingers through hers. “Derby and figure skating shouldn’t be rival sports. They’re just... different. World would be pretty dull if we were all good at the same thing.”

“I guess I’m just nervous,” she said. “Derby is a safe space for girls like us and you’re walking away from that to go into the straightest sport known to humankind. You’re already scared to come out, at least at derby you’re surrounded by the community. Who knows what you’re going to get from them?”

“I mean, the few I met today were really nice.” A smile nudged the corner of my mouth. “In fact, I even came out to one of them.”

Rhi raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah! Right away, no fear.”

Her brow softened and she squeezed my hands. “That’s massive, babe.”

“This is going to be good for me,” I said, smiling. “I can just feel it.”

She stood up on her toes and kissed me. “I hope so.” She stroked my cheek with her thumb, the sadness in her eyes replaced with something else.

“I’m so proud of you, Jaz,” she said, “and all I want is for *you* to be proud of you too.”

THESIS CONCLUSION

Romance publishing is a billion-dollar industry, and the romance genre continues to be the most popular genre of fiction (Castillo). There are many reasons why the romance genre has enjoyed such profound popularity, but one reason argued by Catherine Roach is that romance novels “do deep and complicated” “reparative” work (11) for their predominantly female readership, offering women an escape from the reality of living in a patriarchal culture (11). They depict a world where women always win and provide sanctuary in a patriarchal world where the outcome is often to the contrary. However, there is still plenty of room for romance writers to push the confines of convention, stepping beyond the gender binary in order to queer the romance for readers who currently feel under-represented by the mainstream romance genre. There is a catharsis to be found in writing queer romance as a queer person. Roach refers to the “redeeming power of love” (11) and members of marginalised communities such as the queer community have earned their HEA. In the same vein, as a woman athlete in a sport which is unpopular, under-funded and under-valued, writing a novel set in a story world which celebrates that sport is just as cathartic. I would also argue that the reparative work that the mainstream romance novel can do for the woman reader can also be done for the woman athlete through the reading of a subversive and empowering sports romance.

While I had a general awareness of the tropes and stereotypes which exist in the mainstream sports romance genre, my research led me to discover how frequently these stereotypes appear to the point that sometimes one novel would blend into the next. I also discovered that even when authors are seeking to queer the sports romance, they can still lean into binary gendered stereotypes whether intentional or not. Just because a sports romance features two heroines, this does not necessarily mean that the novel is completely devoid of heteronormative coding. It was this discovery that most influenced my creative work. I drafted my creative component prior to undertaking the bulk of my research and my early plotting and preliminary drafts show that there were moments when I deployed stereotypes even as I was actively trying to avoid them. I concluded that a more subversive way of including these stereotypes was by making a critique of them through my heroine, as she discovered for herself the stereotypical ideas she has developed due to ignorance, creating an exploration of how one can overcome internalised homophobia.

I believe that so far, I have been successful in my queering of the sports romance. There is still a lot more writing to be done before I have a completed manuscript and I know that there is

still more that I can do. *Ready to Roll* will be a sports romance novel which is critical of patriarchal gender norms. It will celebrate women athletes and sapphic love, and it is my offering to both the woman athlete and the romance reader in hope that, through it, they may experience reparative pleasure and the redemptive power of love.

APPENDIX 1 – READY TO ROLL (FIRST 15,000 WORDS)

Chapter 1

There's an old saying, a favourite of my Uncle John: "With everything *I've* done, if I walked into a church, the roof would cave in."

Now, I knew for a fact that this was untrue because I'd spent the last thirty minutes sitting in the fifth pew at St Paul's, staring at the back of Tara Bentley's head and wishing she was my girlfriend and the roof seemed fine.

Believe me, I'd checked.

Maybe my sin wasn't as terrible as I thought. Or maybe it was all a load of bollocks because my father—a man whose favourite pastime was getting drunk and shouting obscenities at his family—walked into the church every week, and yet the roof remained firmly intact.

Nobody in Terwich knew I was a lesbian. How would they? I didn't even know myself. I figured that I'd never had a boyfriend because all the lads in Terwich were minging, but it turns out I wasn't predisposed to fancying lads, minging *or* fit. I'd grown up training alongside the pretty girls at the ice rink and I wanted to be *like* them. Turns out I also wanted to be *with* them.

I'd figured it out about two months earlier during a particularly severe cold snap when Tara Bentley asked me to go with her out west towards Cumbria for a frozen lake skate. It was the closest thing I'd ever experienced to being asked out. My heart nearly cracked my ribs with how hard it'd beaten, and then I realised.

I was hopelessly infatuated. With a girl.

Fantastic.

Terwich wasn't exactly the greatest place to be any kind of minority. Which is probably why Uncle John, who was unmarried, childless, and whispered about around the village, left for Australia years ago.

Terwich was white, Christian and governed by Tories and teapots. It was a tiny village, twenty minutes south-east of Middlesbrough, which was the closest town and the only place I could go to escape the damp, green void. I would kill to be able to flee as far as Uncle John, but Middlesbrough would be better than nothing. My entire life so far had been consumed by ice dancing and waltzing around an ice rink doesn't exactly prepare you for the real world. So, with

no job prospects and no university plans, the chances of me getting out of the village any time soon were about as good as my chances of getting Tara Bentley to be my girlfriend.

“Jayne, you better be listening to this.” Even as a whisper, Mam’s voice grated against my eardrums.

I hadn’t been paying the sermon any attention. I’d been alternating between checking the structural integrity of the ceiling and the magnetism of Tara. Even though my view of her was shaded by her giant black parka, I could tell she was absorbing every word the minister said like a digestive biscuit dunked in a cup of Yorkshire Tea. The minister was prattling on about honouring authority or something. No wonder Mam wanted me to pay attention to *that*. It’s one thing to have a complete battle-axe of a mother. It’s another thing for her to *also* be your coach.

If it weren’t blatantly obvious from the bumper stickers on the back of Mam’s old Vauxhall that she was an ice dance aficionado, the irrefutable evidence was that she had named me and my older brother Chris after Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean. It was like she’d given us prophetic names in hopes that we’d pick up their mantle and become the most iconic British ice dancers in history.

Once I heard Chris tell his mate that me and him were the off-brand Torvill and Dean, the kind you’d see at Poundland. “Me and Jayney are what happens when you order Torvill and Dean on Wish, hoping to get Sarajevo, 1984. But then the package comes, and it’s not gold medal Olympians but Jayne and Chris Bannister, Terwich, 2015.”

It wouldn’t have been as embarrassing if we’d actually been talented. But Chris and I had zero enthusiasm for ice dancing, and because of that—*shockingly* enough—we weren’t particularly good at it. I *also* had zero desire to spend every waking moment freezing my fanny off in an ice rink.

But then came the day Tara invited me to the lake in Cumbria. I’d freeze my fanny off for *her* any day. Ice dancers are all about waltzing and foxtrotting, but Tara spent that entire afternoon teaching me jumps and spins. And I bloody loved it. Chris had come along too to meet up with some lads and play hockey out there.

The cold snap only lasted a week, and by the following Sunday the lake wasn’t safe to skate on anymore, but that little taste was all it took. I was so invested in learning to jump and spin (and, let’s be honest, hang out with Tara) that we decided we’d nick off to the rink in Stockton-on-Tees every Sunday after church while Mam and Dad had lunch with their friends.

These skating jaunts with Tara were the only thing getting me through the morning service at St Paul's, and now the weather had turned again, freezing the lake. The rink had been fine, but out on the lake, we were freer to jump and spin without worrying about dodging kids or being yelled at by floor guards. And there was something whimsical and magical about skating in nature with a pretty girl I had a hopeless crush on. We were somewhere no one could see us. Somewhere I was free. And even though, by all accounts, Tara was certifiably straight, I was more than happy to be her friend ... and also exploit our friendship somewhat so she could teach me to figure skate.

I spent the rest of the church service pretending to pay attention while mentally preparing what jump I was going to do to impress Tara today. The service over, Mam and Dad went off to meet their friends, and I hung back, waiting and hoping that Tara would come over and say hello.

Of course, she did. She was my friend. She didn't know I was secretly in love with her.

"Are you ready for the lake?" she said, bouncing up beside me and grinning.

I felt my cheeks warm. "Of course."

Tara was tiny. Well, relatively speaking. I was tall—all the Bannisters were—so she only came up to just below my shoulder, and she had to do a little skip to keep up with my stride as we headed out of the church.

She linked her arm through mine (in a strictly platonic way, of course), and I felt my muscles tense as we reached the car park.

"I was thinking it's time you try to land a double jump." She was laying down a challenge, and there was nothing I liked more than a good challenge.

I stopped walking and glanced down at her. She was beaming up at me, silently daring me to say yes. I extricated my arm from hers and put my hands on my hips.

"All right, Bentley. Challenge accepted. And what do I get if I land one?"

Tara giggled that light, musical giggle that made her nose crinkle. God, she was so flipping cute.

"If you land a double, we'll do afternoon tea at Remy's after school tomorrow. My treat."

I raised an eyebrow. Hanging out with Tara outside of skating? Unheard of. But incredibly appealing.

I stuck out my hand. “Deal.”

Tara took my hand and shook it. “Excellent! I’ll see you on the lake, Bannister.”

Then she flounced off towards her brother’s car, her dark chocolate ponytail bouncing behind her.

Tara was the only person I knew who enunciated all of her ‘T’s. That was the thing about Terwich. On one side of the village were the council flats where I lived, and on the other side, on the outskirts, were these beautiful old houses with fabulous stonework and manicured rose gardens. That was where the Bentleys lived. Tara went to a private school in Middlesbrough, while I went to a state school just outside of Stockton. I had *school* friends and *skating* friends, and neither group knew the other existed. In a perfect world, I would have liked some *life* friends, but that vacancy remained open.

Chapter 2

The prospect of afternoon tea with Tara made me nervous, and as I picked my way across the icy car park to where Chris was waiting in his car to collect me, I reminded myself that it wasn’t guaranteed yet. I had to land a double first.

Tara always told me I was a quick learner. I’d been taught all the basic jumps when I started skating, and I’d been able to jump singles since I was a kid. But Tara had been helping me improve my technique so I could get more height and rotation. Out on the lake with Tara, I forgot all the risks that came with jumping and spinning on wild ice in adverse weather because all I wanted to do was impress her. And I’d try anything she asked, even if it meant I’d end up with my leg in a cast.

I’d landed my first Axel after only a couple of weeks with Tara, and she’d tackled me into a hug. I’d copped a nose-full of her vanilla shampoo and baby powder deodorant, and it had been nothing short of delightful. Since then, it’d become somewhat of a Pavlov’s dog situation. Like maybe if I landed another jump, I’d get another hug.

I slid into the passenger seat of Chris’s car and quickly closed the door behind me, trying to keep in as much heat as possible. Now he was in his twenties, Chris had finagled his way out of having to attend church, but he still kept mum about his hockey escapades.

“How does it feel to be twenty-one and still have to sneak out behind Mam’s back to play hockey?” I asked, cranking up the heater even higher.

Chris shot me a look. “You’re eighteen. What’s stopping *you* from telling her about your figure skating fantasies?”

“My sense of self-preservation,” I replied, holding my mittened hands up to the heating vent as Chris drove. “Are you *ever* gonna tell her you wanna quit?”

“Not as long as I wanna keep living.”

“If you quit, maybe I’ll be off the hook. No one else is tall enough to lift me.”

Chris chuckled. “She’ll just put you in solo.”

“Got no Olympic future in solo.”

“Got no Olympic future as a pair.”

When we arrived at the lake, the hockey lads were already zipping around on the ice. Beyond where they’d marked out their rink was Tara, clad in black, her signature ponytail swishing about in the cold wind.

She centred a layback spin, and I watched her turn around and around, hypnotising me, drawing me deeper and deeper into her gravitational pull. When she whipped out of the spin, she floated across the ice and came to the perfect delicate and sudden stop that sprayed flecks of ice up in front of me and Chris. Her cheeks were pink and windswept, and the few stray wisps of hair that had freed themselves from her ponytail were dancing around her face. Her lips were turning a pale shade of blue, and she wore a smile that made me feel warm inside, despite being five minutes away from succumbing to frostbite.

“Skates on Bannister! Let’s see this double.”

I tried to fix my mouth into a defiant line, but the trace of a smile at the corner of my lips gave me away.

“You’re on, Bentley,” I dropped my skate bag. “I hope you like afternoon tea.”

She giggled. “Odd threat, but whatever works for you.”

Minutes later, my skates were on, and I was tearing around the frozen lake, the blisteringly cold wind slapping me in the face. It felt like freedom. Freezing cold freedom.

I warmed up with a waltz jump—the simplest of the jumps—but with Tara watching, I knew I had to make even the most basic jumps look as perfect as possible.

Tara laughed. “Honestly, you look like you’re raring up for a double Axel!”

“One day!” I called as I flew past her.

Tara clapped along as I progressed through all of the single jumps. When she wasn’t clapping, she was hugging her arms around herself, protecting her small body from the cold, a task that I wished was mine.

“What double are you going to try?” she asked.

I pursed my lips. “Why not all of them?”

Tara’s eyes grew wide. “Jayne, make sure you’re careful. Last thing I want is your mother finding out I’ve injured you.”

I conceded. “Fine, I’ll start with a toe loop. But you can’t hold me back, Bentley!”

I set up the jump using the entry Tara had taught me. I hit the outside back edge, stretched my left leg behind me to stab the ice with my toe pick, and threw myself into the cold air.

I baulked halfway and only did a single.

Tara gasped. “You scared me!”

I shook out both my legs and smacked my quads with the heels of my hands, mentally scolding myself.

I skated back around the corner and set up a second jump. Edge, stab, leap. This time, I rotated about one and a half times.

Tara squealed. “That was pretty good!”

“But not good enough to win the hand of the fair maiden.”

Tara giggled again, and I felt my face turn red. What did I have to say *that* for?!

I turned back to skate another lap, hoping that Tara couldn’t distinguish between my flush of embarrassment and my wind-nipped cheeks. I set up the jump, hit the toe pick and launched.

Stuff it. I’ve got nothing to lose.

But actually, I had plenty to lose. My secret figure skating lessons would be over if I injured myself. Partly because I’d be injured and partly because I’d be dead from my mother having killed me. But I didn’t have to worry long because milliseconds later, I’d stuck the landing.

And God, it felt good.

Tara shrieked and bounced on her toe picks, clapping like a seal. “That was amazing!”

“It *felt* amazing.”

“I shouldn’t be teaching you,” Tara joked. “Next thing, you’ll be better than me.”

I scoffed. “You know you don’t need to worry about *that*.”

I’d missed the figure skating boat long ago. My mother’s ice dancing obsession had made sure of that. It didn’t matter how many wild-ice lessons I had with Tara, I’d never be able to catch up with skaters who’d been jumping and spinning all their lives.

I sped off again and jumped another toe loop to make sure it wasn’t a fluke. I landed clean. With the initial nerves shaken out, I took on the challenge of a double Salchow without hesitation.

Tara shook her head in disbelief. “You’re a natural.”

“That’s two doubles landed. I think that means you owe me two afternoon teas.”

“Why don’t you make it a third?”

A grin slid across my face. “Flip or loop?”

“Flip!”

The landing wasn’t quite as sure as the other jumps, and I nearly put my hand down to avoid putting my *backside* down. But I’d got all the way around and landed backwards like I was supposed to.

“Three afternoon teas!” I called out. “Make it four?”

“Be careful!”

I landed the loop flat on my arse.

Tara giggled. “Looks like three it is!”

I shrugged. “Can’t win ‘em all.”

Still, I was chuffed to bits with what I *had* achieved.

“Figure skating looks good on you, Jayne,” Tara said, skidding over to me. “It really is a shame you can’t compete.”

I wiped my chilly nose on my sleeve and sniffed. “Tell me about it.”

“We could swap,” Tara said with a laugh. “You can do singles, and I’ll be Chris’s new dance partner.”

I noticed Tara’s eyes flick over to where Chris was hitting pucks around with his friends. I couldn’t help but pull a face.

“You *don’t* want to be Chris’s partner, trust me. You’re more likely to get injured with him than you are doing singles. You’d be better off with *me* as a partner.”

Tara folded her arms and smiled. “All right then. I taught you jumps and spins; you can teach me to dance.”

I nearly had a heart attack right there on the ice. “You wanna learn to dance?”

“Sure,” she said with a shrug. “Why not? It looks fun. Maybe you can even show me a couple of lifts.”

“You trust me not to drop you?”

“Of course.”

My heart rate sky-rocketed. “Um, okay, well ... what dance do you want to learn?”

“Whichever one is your favourite.”

“Uhh, that’d be the Rhumba, I guess.”

I suggested it because you have to do it in a Kilian hold—which meant you skated side-by-side instead of face-to-face. The idea of holding Tara *at all* was making me sweat despite the cold. The sweating got worse when I remembered how raunchy Rhumbas were. *Flippin’ ’eck Jayne, what are you doing?*

“Okay, Rhumba it is!” Tara said, holding up her arms in what I could only assume was her interpretation of a dance hold.

In too deep now. Looks like we’re Rhumba-ing.

“Well, for a start, it’s in Kilian.”

I took her by the shoulders and turned her away from me. I stepped behind her and slightly to her side. Then I took her left hand in mine and held it in front of me. I had to take a moment to calm myself before I wrapped my right arm around her back and placed my hand on her hip.

“Now you put your hand on mine,” I said, my throat feeling a little dry all of a sudden.

Tara did what I asked. “Okay, now what?”

My tongue darted out to wet my parched lips. “Now we dance.”

Chapter 3

“Jayne!”

That pretend-pretentious voice could only mean one thing. Another morning being forced out of bed earlier than anyone should ever be made to rise. Surely it was a breach of one of my fundamental human rights.

“Jayne!”

I opened my eyes, but that was the most effort I intended to put in until she physically removed my duvet. Maybe if I ignored her, I could get her to drop the act. Perhaps I could even make her swear. That was always hilarious.

“JAYNE!” the third bellow was accompanied by a beam of bright light slicing through the darkness of my room.

Mam appeared as a silhouette in my doorway. She was bloody terrifying when she wanted to be. She was spindly thin with jet-black, box-dyed hair and sharp features that gave her a ghoulish quality, especially when she was backlit and fuming.

“Jayne, would you get your lazy arse out of bed? We’re leaving in twenty minutes!” Then she melted back into the shadows, levitating like a vampire down the hall, leaving my door wide open.

I smirked in the dark. I’d done it! I’d made her swear. I knew exactly what buttons to push with Mam, and it was always a treat to watch her posh Ice Queen mask slip, if only for a moment.

There’s nothing the least bit fancy about you, Mam, is there? Not anymore. You and Dad with barely two pennies to rub together. But nooooooo, can’t let the skate mams know that now, can we? Former European Champion, Jacqueline Atkinson, living in a council flat with a useless husband, coaching kids who will never be as good as she was? The scandal!

Mam had fallen a long way since her glory days, and I knew she resented it.

Digging deep into the recesses of my weary body, I found the energy to kick my legs over the side of the bed. I looked at my phone: 4.10 am. A groan ripped from my throat as I grabbed some training gear and trudged down the hall to the bathroom.

Mam and I were ready to walk out the door by the agreed-upon time, but as usual, we had to wait for Chris. I folded my arms and leaned against the wall, not even bothering to hide my yawn.

Mam glanced at her watch. “Christopher!”

I winced. I pitied the neighbours. 4.30 am and my mother was bursting her bloody windpipe. Screaming matches in our flat were hardly unheard of, but the least she could do was wait until the sun had risen.

Mam and I stood in silence until Chris came stumbling down the hall, skate bag slung over one shoulder, his blonde hair sitting on his head like a bird’s nest. Chris didn’t have the build of an ice dancer, and it was never more evident than when he practically had to turn sideways to fit down our narrow hallway. Almost as broad in the shoulders as he was tall, he looked like a better fit for the rugby field than the ice rink. However, his brute strength did come in handy for lifts.

Mam gave me a visual once-over. “I wish you’d wear a leotard and dress like a girl for once.”

I glanced down at my outfit. I wasn’t sure why wearing compression pants in lieu of a leotard made me look any less like a girl. Mam pinched a strand of my blonde hair and dropped it again, screwing up her nose as if it were a dead mouse.

She cast her gaze between me and Chris. “And would it kill either of you to run a brush through your hair?”

The frigid early morning air was so biting that entering the ice rink at 5 am felt like a reprieve. The droning hum of the Zamboni filled the building as Chris and I began our warm-up routine. Mam fussed about as she always did, giving us corrections on everything and anything, and by a quarter past five, we were all standing in the middle of the ice in a little triangle. The Bannisters were the first ones on the rink and the last ones off, whether we liked it or not. I suppressed a yawn and only half listened as Mam told us what we’d be working on that morning.

Across the rink, I saw the glass doors open. It was Tara, her mother dragging behind her looking weary. I caught Tara’s eye and pulled a face.

“Jayne,” Mam snapped verbally *and* literally, clicking her fingers in my face. “Is there somewhere you’d rather be?”

I clasped my hands together in front of me and simply replied, “No, Jacqueline.”

Mam insisted that at the rink, me and Chris called her Jacqueline. She said she didn’t want any of the other skaters to get it into their heads that her children were receiving preferential treatment. Which was a bit rich considering there wasn’t a single person at the rink that *Jacqueline* viewed with less regard than me and Chris.

I watched over Mam’s shoulder as Tara flitted onto the rink, her high ponytail bouncing behind her and her pink chiffon skirt fluttering around her thighs. She pulled a face at me as she passed by before looking a little too intently at Chris.

Ugh.

I glanced at my brother. He was too busy trying to avoid Mam’s snapping fingers to notice Tara had been ogling him. Chris had very little grace and so little rhythm that he was unable to skate in time unless he had me counting the beat in his ear. I loved Chris, and we’d always been close, but I was never going to have a fulfilling career dancing with him.

We finished training around the time most normal people were waking up. I stepped off the ice, pulled my blade guards on and stomped over to the stands. I slumped down on a seat and began taking my skates off, my backside frozen and sore from the several times Chris had dropped me.

“Rough morning?”

I glanced up.

Tara stood in front of me, wearing a cheeky little smile on her pink lips. “Chris really is better suited for handling a hockey stick.”

“You’re not wrong,” I replied, massaging my sore, wet hip.

Tara lowered her voice and glanced over to where Chris was sitting. “He makes up for it in other areas. He *is* easy on the eyes.”

I pulled a face. “Gross, Tara. That’s my *brother*.”

“I wonder what else he could handle.”

I gagged. “Disgusting.”

Tara giggled. “You still up for afternoon tea?”

Was she kidding? It was all I’d been thinking about since she’d first suggested it.

“Of course.”

“Great! I’ll meet you at Remy’s then. At a quarter to four.”

“It’s a date.”

Remy’s was a quaint, hole-in-the-wall café in a trendy little suburb between Stockton and Middlesbrough. The kind of place where a cappuccino costs five quid. I’d never have gone there if I’d been the one paying.

Tara was there when I arrived, laying claim to a booth nestled close to a fireplace. The flickering orange flames were bringing out flecks of deep, reddish-gold in her otherwise dark hair, and the way her face lit up when she spotted me made my stomach do a little backflip.

“Hey!”

“Hiya.” My voice was a little wobbly as I slid into the booth opposite her.

The warmth from the brick fireplace was divine and I wriggled out of my coat. The air smelled like coffee beans, and it was filled with the hum of conversations, clinking teaspoons and some quiet jazz.

“Get whatever you like,” Tara said. “You earned it.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from smiling and began thumbing through the menu. Suspicions confirmed. How anyone could justify charging nearly twenty quid for eggs on toast, I’d never understand.

I watched Tara cradle her mug in her hands as she breathed in the vapours of her hot chocolate. She was so perfect it was irritating. Her piercing blue eyes with long dark lashes, the light dusting of freckles across her cheeks and nose, her pink lips which looked so soft and, dare I say, kissable ...

“Is it odd that we’ve never really hung out together outside of skating?” Her tone was platonic like a bucket of cold water being dumped over my fantasies.

“A bit odd,” I replied, “although neither of us really have much free time outside of skating.”

“True. Perhaps we should make more time.”

My brain glitched. *Maybe there is a chance?* “Yeah, we should.”

I had to take an excessively long sip of my coffee to process a sudden onset of gay panic.

As we sat and ate our treats—chatting about our lives beyond the four walls of the ice rink—we realised that despite us being friends for a while, we didn’t *really* know each other. I learned that Tara liked books and yoga, and she was the head girl at her school. I learned that she wanted to study music at university, but her father was pushing her toward political science. I learned that her family holidayed in Spain (because, of *course* they did). And I learned that the more I got to know her, the more enchanted I became.

I lost track of time watching her nose crinkle when she laughed that sweet laugh. I adored how her eyes grew wide and sparkly when she spoke of the things she loved.

I was so distracted I didn’t even notice when she addressed me.

“Sorry, what?” I asked, snapping back into reality, feeling less than smooth.

Tara smiled. “I said you skated great yesterday. Almost all your doubles. I wish I got mine that quickly.”

I leaned back in my chair and sighed. “It’s all a bit pointless, though, isn’t it?”

Tara frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s not like I’m ever gonna get a chance to compete.”

“Why do you do it then?”

“Because it’s fun,” I said with a shrug. “It makes me feel free. And it’s a weird sort of rebellion.”

Tara chuckled.

“Plus,” I added, my stomach fluttering a little bit, “we get to hang out, which ... you know ... I like.”

I thought I saw Tara blush, but it may have just been the glow from the fire.

Afternoon tea had gone far longer than I'd anticipated. I was going to be home late, and Mam would have a monk on. I considered scaling the side of our building and smashing through my bedroom window, but then I remembered the security bars.

Tea was already on the table when I slipped in the front door, and Dad and Chris looked moments away from tucking in.

"Where on earth have you been?" Mam sounded livid.

"At the library. Studying."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Jayne Bannister, if I find out you were sneaking around with a boy—"

"Ew, no, Mam! I wasn't sneaking around with a boy!"

"You better not have been!"

As if I'd risk my mother's wrath to sneak around with a *boy*. I couldn't imagine anything *less* worth doing with my time.

I slid into my chair at the dining table, and Mam placed a plate in front of me. The focus shifted off me, and I relaxed my shoulders. I stabbed at a sausage, ignoring whatever it was Mam and Dad were rabbiting on about.

"What about Owen Fletcher, eh?" Dad said.

That got my attention. Owen was a year older than me, and I'd always had a feeling he was gay, but I didn't know for sure. His parents were friends with my parents and just as religious. Owen didn't go to church anymore, and I had a feeling I knew why.

Mam shook her head. "Poor Delia, she's absolutely devastated."

Delia was Owen's mother.

"What happened to Owen?" I asked.

Mam pursed her lips. "He's moved in with his friend, but Delia just found out he's not his *friend*. He's a ..."

Mam was gagging on whatever word she was trying to spit out, but I got the gist.

“Oh, good for Owen.”

Dad glared at me. “How exactly is that *good* for Owen, Jayne?”

“Well, if he’s happy—”

“Believe me, Jayne,” Dad continued, “I’ve seen first-hand what *this kind of thing* does to a family, and there’s nothing *happy* about it. Look at your Uncle John. Unmarried, no family, living alone on the other side of the world. Do you think he’s happy?”

I had to assume he probably was, considering he had an entire planet between him and my father, but I decided it was best not to say that part aloud.

“And happiness is all that matters, I suppose?” Mam chimed in, her voice dripping with irony. “Not the natural way of things like God intended.”

“Well, then, if God doesn’t like it, he probably shouldn’t have made Owen Fletcher and Uncle John gay.”

Mam’s entire face turned red. “God doesn’t make people gay, Jayne.”

“All right, who does then?”

“People make a choice—”

“People make a choice to what? Be marginalised for the hell of it?”

“You watch your mouth, young lady!” Dad interjected through clenched teeth.

Mam continued, “The Bible is very clear—”

I scoffed. “I don’t think the Bible is very clear about *anything*.”

Silence rang through the room. Mam looked like she was about to explode. Chris looked like he was trying not to laugh. Dad turned to me, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

I’d done it now.

“You got something you want to tell us, Jayne?”

I nearly threw up on my plate.

“No! Of course not!” I had to backpedal and fast. “I just don’t think you should be talking about Owen Fletcher like he’s dead when all he’s done is gone and gotten a boyfriend.”

“Well, let me tell you right now, if this one”—he nodded towards Chris—“ever brings home a boyfriend, he may as well be dead.”

The amusement drained from Chris’s face. He didn’t say anything. He sat there staring at his tea, looking uneasy. I squeezed my fork tightly in my fist. It didn’t look like I would be coming out to my family any time soon.

“I’m not really surprised about Owen,” Mam said, ignoring Dad’s remark. “He always was a little ... you know.”

“A little what?” I asked.

Both my parents glared at me. That was my cue to shut it.

I ate the rest of my tea in silence, listening to Mam and Dad drone on about how Owen always “talked funny” and “walked like a girl” and how Delia was planning on having a weekly prayer meeting for him. I was relieved that Chris wasn’t joining in, but he hadn’t stood up to them either. I’d always figured Chris would have my back if I ever got the courage to come out. Maybe not.

Chapter 4

The weeks dragged on in Terwich. Every teenager who lived there could attest to that. But *this* week was moving slower than golden syrup on a snowy day. Probably because the only thing on my mind was seeing Tara on Sunday. Sure, I saw her at the rink almost daily, but it wasn’t the same. At the rink, I was under the watchful eye of *Jacqueline*. But on the lake, it was just me and Tara and the frigid wind whipping around us, reminding us that we were alive. And those moments were the only times I *did* feel alive. The rest of the time, I was merely existing.

By the end of church on Sunday morning, I was bursting. After our first afternoon tea together, I was dying to spend more time with Tara. And after last week's jumping success, I was champing at the bit to work even harder. Maybe even try a double Axel.

Chris and I arrived at the lake at our usual time, and the second I got out of the car, I was nearly bowled over by Tara.

"Hey!" Her face was lit up with an absurdly joyful grin.

I raised a suspicious brow. "What?"

"Today is going to be amazing!"

"Why ...?"

"Can't tell you, have to show you. You're going to love me!"

Way ahead of you, sweetheart.

Tara grabbed my hand and dragged me towards the lake. The sky was overcast, and the cold was even more bitter than usual. The sun was struggling to poke its head through the slate grey clouds, and a fog hung low across the ice, giving it a magical yet eerie look. The snow crunched under my shoes as I padded along after Tara. She could be leading me off a cliff, and I'd still follow her, no questions asked.

Thankfully she was just leading me to the benches beside the lake.

"Now," Tara said, releasing my hand and placing her bag on the bench. "I hope you like them. I think you will."

I cocked my head, and Tara produced from her bag ... her own skates?

I squinted at her. "Your skates?"

She held the skates out to me. "*Your* skates."

I had to stop my chin from falling into the snow. "Excuse me?"

"Well, it turns out my parents got me new skates for my birthday."

"But that's not until next week."

"Yes, but my mother knew I couldn't wait until then."

Tara handed me the old skates and pulled out of her bag a brand new pair, snow white and decorated with tiny diamantes. The blades looked sharp enough to kill someone.

“I know dance skates aren’t ideal for jumping, especially now you’re trying bigger jumps and ... I won my first Nationals in those,” she looked fondly at her old skates, “so I thought it might be nice if I gifted them to you. Because I know you’ll take care of them.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words wouldn’t come out. I didn’t know what to say. All I knew was I was going to have to get her a bloody good birthday present.

Her old skates were still in impeccable condition. They weren’t overly broken in—they were barely even scuffed—the Bentleys apparently had more money than God, so they could fork out for brand-new skates at the drop of a hat.

“Do you like them?” she asked. “I didn’t want you thinking I was treating you like a charity case. I hope they fit. I know I’m small, but my feet are kind of big, so maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Tara looked nervous. I needed to say *something*. The thought of it being an act of pity hadn’t crossed my mind until she mentioned it, but I knew Tara’s intentions were as pure as the snow around us and, frankly, I didn’t care if she thought I was a charity case if it meant I got a free pair of figure skates. Also, I was a little smitten that Tara thought so highly of me that she wanted to gift me something so important.

The feelings swirling around my heart reached my face, and I beamed. “I love them! But do you want me to give you some money?”

Tara held up her hands. “No, no. They’re a present.”

“Seriously?”

Tara laughed. “Yes!”

I couldn’t help myself. I pulled her into a hug, murmuring my thanks into her hair. Tara gave me a squeeze, and I tried my very best not to be a creep and smell her.

“I just had the blades sharpened,” Tara said. “The boot is so comfortable and supportive, and the toe picks are *fierce*. There’ll be no stopping you now!”

We laced up our skates and took to the ice. I wiggled my toes inside the new boots. They were a little small, which was unsurprising given our height difference. But it seemed Tara had larger feet than I’d realised, because I was able to wear them *somewhat* comfortably. And they felt different. Stiffer but in a good way. The extra support would make it safer to try bigger

jumps. And Tara was right. The toe picks *were* fierce. I could only imagine the extra height I'd get out of them.

We floated around on the ice together as I got used to the new feeling underfoot.

"How do they feel?" Tara asked.

"Like a dream."

I jumped through all of my singles, feeling the difference between my old skates and the new ones. The jumps were a little shaky at first, but after a few goes, I was jumping higher and landing stronger than ever. Then I threw a few Axels for good measure before moving onto some doubles.

"Nice!" Tara cheered after I landed a particularly strong double Salchow.

"You know I've only got one thing on my mind," I said, skidding over to her.

"What's that?"

"Double Axel."

Tara's eyes went wide. "Oh, please be careful!"

"I didn't get this far being careful," I said, sounding cockier than I felt.

I'd been over-rotating a single Axel for quite some time, and with Tara's lucky skates and the overwhelming urge to make her proud, I thought that maybe today could be the day I pulled off something outrageous.

I sped off, building some momentum. I skated a curve and lined up the jump. I hit the right back outside edge, I stepped forward onto my left foot and leapt up into the air as high as I could.

One, two ... two and a bit.

I landed on one foot and then immediately came crashing down, sliding on my backside across the wet, carved-up ice. Tara skidded over, looking worried.

"Oh my god, Jayne! Are you all right?"

I threw my head back and laughed. "That was amazing!"

Tara visibly relaxed. "You totally wiped out!"

"Yeah, but what a rush!"

“You know,” she said, holding out a hand, “I don’t want to hype you up so much that you get carried away and kill yourself, but that was almost rotated.”

I took her hand and let her help me to my feet. My stupid brain chose that moment to remind me just how much I liked having her hand in mine. I shook away the thought.

“Too late, I’m hyped.”

I sped off and skated another circle. I took a deep breath and steadied my resolve, lining up for another double Axel.

I thought about how far I’d come since I’d first floundered about with jumps on the lake. I thought about every Sunday I’d spent with Tara and all the things she’d taught me. I thought about her lucky skates and how much I wanted to impress her.

And I launched.

One, two, two and a half and ...

A solid landing!

A solid *rotated* landing! Tara shrieked and tackled me at the waist. I lifted her straight off her feet, and she let out a laugh as I spun her around.

“What lift was that?” she asked when I set her back down.

I frowned. “A rotational lift, I guess?”

“See? We’d make great partners!”

I chewed my lip as my heart spluttered. “Yeah. We sure would.”

Tara giggled again. I was moments away from suggesting I try another jump when I heard Chris’s voice cut through the cold, crisp air. “Jayney!”

I turned from Tara and squinted across the lake at him. He had his skates off and was waving at me from the benches.

“What is it?” I shouted.

“Get over here, would you!” he shouted back.

I groaned, apologised to Tara, and skated over to where he was standing. I was about to tell him off for interrupting me when I noticed his face. He looked worried. And it usually took a lot to worry Chris.

“What is it?” I asked, my stomach tightening.

“You checked your phone?”

“No.”

“Mam and Dad have been trying to call us. They said we need to come home right away.”

My heart beat harder in my chest. “Do they know we’re out here?”

“I don’t think they care about that right now.” His tone was uneasy, and I didn’t like it one bit.

I sat down on the bench to take my skates off, and Tara’s shadow fell over me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice wavering.

I blinked up at her, my lower lip quivering. “I don’t know.”

Chapter 5

My legs felt boneless, and they trembled, struggling to sustain the weight of my body as I walked back to Chris’s car. I slid into the passenger seat, and he started the engine, a tension hanging in the air between us as I tried to work up the courage to ask what was happening. But I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear the answer.

After what felt like an age, I could no longer bear the weight of the silence pressing in around us. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. I only spoke to Mam for a few minutes.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“You know Uncle John? In Australia?”

“Yeah.”

“I think he died.”

A flood of relief washed over me, and I dropped my tension with a sigh, only for a wave of guilt to come along and pommel me into the ground.

I knew it was terrible of me to feel relieved, but it wasn’t like I was glad he was dead. I was just grateful I wasn’t about to get busted for something. It was difficult to truly grieve for

Uncle John when I hadn't seen him since I was seven years old, although my vague memories of him were fond ones. Dad never spoke about him unless it was to make a snide remark about his sexuality or to gripe about how Uncle John had been able to buy his own house because he didn't have to spend all his money on "ungrateful kids".

I supposed Uncle John had been dead to Dad and Mam for years. That very thought and all it meant for *me* and *my* future made me a little queasy.

"Is that all?" I asked Chris, wondering why he was acting so cagey.

"Mam said there was something else they wanted to talk to us about. She said it was important."

I spent the entire drive back to Terwich with my stomach in knots, trying to work out what was going on and hoping it was just Mam being dramatic. I couldn't understand for the life of me why this news was cause for me to cut my skate-date with Tara short. Although the second Chris and I walked through the front door of the flat, I felt a kind of thickness in the air that told me something was stirring in there.

Dad was sitting in his armchair in the living room, his elbows resting on his thighs. Mam was pacing a hole in the carpet behind him. Both of them raised their heads as me and Chris walked into the room.

"We need to have a chat," Dad said, nodding towards the lounge opposite him.

A glance passed between me and Chris as we sat side by side. A beat of uncomfortable silence echoed through the room, and I wrung my hands together in my lap.

"So," Dad looked grim, "I'm afraid your Uncle John ... has passed away."

Dad's voice cracked a little, and he squinted like he was trying to squeeze out a tear. It was forced. I had no doubt in the world about that. I'd heard the things Dad had said about his brother in the past, and I could tell he was going for his BAFTA moment.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Chris said, shaking his head. "It's such a shame me and Jayne never got to know him better."

Dad shifted in his seat, looking awkward.

Mam glanced at us but continued her pacing. "Well, your Uncle John chose a lifestyle we preferred you ... weren't exposed to."

I bit the inside of my cheek and squeezed my hands together tighter.

“As you know,” Dad continued, “your Uncle John didn’t have any other family. So ... as it turns out ... he’s left everything to us.”

I blinked at him. Surely this was a good thing. I didn’t know much about Uncle John, but I’d heard Dad whine about him enough times to know he had a lot more money than we did.

“John was a lot more successful than me—something our parents always made perfectly clear.” Dad looked as though his entire childhood was replaying in his mind. “That being the case, he’s left us a fair bit.”

I tried not to seem too interested, doing my best to look sombre, but the potential for what it could mean piqued my interest.

“He’s left the two of you a sum each and everything else to me. Which so happens to include ... his house ... in Sydney.”

Behind him, Mam stopped pacing and folded her arms.

“John didn’t have a mortgage, and I don’t know if you know this, but houses in Sydney are bloody expensive nowadays,” Dad continued. “He bought the place over a decade ago, and since then, the value has shot up. Now, we could always sell the property and get the money. It would fetch us more than enough to buy our own place here and live comfortably. But there’s another option that your mother and I have been discussing.”

Mam glanced at Dad, thin-lipped, wearing an expression I couldn’t quite read but which I imagined was the expression of a woman who’d just lost an argument.

“We’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” Dad said, “and we feel like it might be the best option for us to ... move. To Sydney.”

The words hung in the air. Move? To *Australia*? To the other side of the world? It felt like my heart was pounding in my skull.

“We understand that this is a big decision,” Mam said, “but your father’s always dreamed of living somewhere like Australia.”

The words “your father” dripped with venom.

“It would be a nice change of scenery for us,” Dad said. “I’m sure you’ll all be chuffed to see the back end of this dump.”

He wasn't wrong. Given a choice between living in Terwich and living in Sydney ... you'd have to be mad not to choose Sydney. Still, it was a lot of information to process in such a short time.

"Now, the two of you are adults," Mam said, "and we wouldn't make the move until after Jayne's finished school. So *ultimately*, it would be up to you whether you move with us or stay here."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The woman who last week was all vexed because I was late for tea was now saying I could stay in England by myself? As if I could afford to. She must've known that. Her offer of freedom was nothing but an illusion.

But even if I *could* afford it—and even if staying in England meant having my parents off my back—as if I'd want to stay in *Terwich* when the opportunity to live in *Sydney* was right there in front of me.

If the look on Chris's face was anything to go by, he seemed dead keen, and I wasn't about to let him move across the planet without me.

"Do either of you have anything to say?" Dad asked.

"It's a surprise," Chris said, "but I'm not against it. Not like I have much going for me here."

Mam turned to me. "Penny for your thoughts, Jayne?"

I couldn't work out what my thoughts *were*. A million of them were flying through my head. I loathed Terwich, and I was mortified by the council flat I called home. I'd be chuffed to leave them both.

I'd be finished school, and it wasn't like I had any university plans.

I fancied the idea of starting a new life in a new place. Being different and interesting. Being the lass from a faraway land who talks with an accent and says funny slang words no one understands. Honestly, it would be the perfect opportunity to reinvent myself. Start over on a clean slate of freshly Zambonied ice.

Ice.

My thoughts wandered to Tara. Beautiful, perfect Tara Bentley. The girl I secretly loved but who would never love me back. Who was going to help me with my jumps and spins if I

moved to Australia? It was *hot* there. They didn't *have* frozen lakes. Sure, they had ice rinks, but they didn't have Tara.

Unrequited love aside, she was my best friend, and I'd miss her like nobody's business. But it was time to get real. She wasn't ever going to feel about me the way I felt about her. It's one thing to have a crush on someone who doesn't like you back. It's a completely different thing to have a crush on someone who can't.

Maybe putting an entire world between me and Tara would be the best way to get over her. It would probably be good for me in the long run. Didn't make the thought any less devastating.

"Jayne?" Mam snapped. "Care to speak?"

I blinked a few times, trying to formulate the words.

"Sounds good," was all I managed.

"Excellent."

"It really means a lot that you're both on board with this," Dad said. "The place John's left us is great. And the location ... it's prime real estate ..."

The rest of the words blended in with one another until they were nothing but white noise swirling around in my head and squeezing my brain.

I was moving to Australia, apparently.

Chapter 6

I didn't join the family for tea that night. I lied and said I wasn't feeling well. I mean, it wasn't exactly a lie. I'd felt *better*. My stomach had been in knots ever since my parents dropped the Sydney bomb and the thought of adding food into the mix sounded like the least appealing thing in the world. Or rather, the second least. The *absolute* least appealing thing in the world was the idea of moving to another country and leaving Tara behind.

It's not as if I was holding out hope that Tara would wake up one day, realise she fancied girls, and confess her love to me, but still. Every time we parted, I'd look forward to the next time I'd get to see her, and not knowing when that next time would be was causing the knots in my stomach to tighten. Especially when I knew it was likely there might not ever *be* a next time.

But I couldn't deny that moving to Sydney would be a hell of an opportunity. For a start, I wouldn't be poor anymore. Also, it was a major city, so I imagined it would be much more

tolerant than bloody *Terwich* would ever be. If I ever *did* get the courage to come out, I'd probably have a better go of it. I might even find myself a girlfriend.

A knock at my door startled me, and I furiously blinked back the tears that had begun to prick at my eyes.

"Who is it?" I called out, trying and failing to keep my voice from sounding too strangled.

"It's me."

Chris.

I sniffed. "Come in."

Chris opened the door slowly and poked his head inside. He must have seen how gloomy I was because he gave me a pitiful look as he stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. "I was just checking in to see if you were okay."

"I'm fine," I said, sounding the furthest thing from fine.

"Well, that's bollocks." He pulled the chair out from under my small desk and sat down. "What's going on?"

I scoffed. "What's going on? You didn't hear that massive bomb they dropped on us?"

"Moving to Australia?"

"Yes, moving to Australia." The words didn't even sound like they made sense coming out of my mouth.

"You don't *have* to go."

I scoffed again. "As if I'm gonna stay here by myself."

Chris clasped his hands together and rested his elbows on his knees. "It's not so bad, is it? I mean, there's nothing really keeping either of us here."

He was right. All of our grandparents had passed away, and Mam didn't speak to her sister, so Chris and I didn't know our cousins.

I sniffed. "You seem pretty sold on moving then."

Chris shifted in the chair. "Look, I don't exactly have a lot going for me here. I'm twenty-one, I'm working in a tuck shop, and I don't really like any of my friends." He let out a sigh. "I guess I'm thinking moving to another country might be a good chance for a fresh start."

I gave him a look. “I wonder if that’s what the convicts thought.”

Chris chuckled. “That’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

I sat up on the bed and crossed my legs. “As dramatic as them making a life-changing decision in a couple of hours?”

Chris sighed. “They must’ve figured Uncle John would leave his stuff to us. He had no one else. They’ve probably been planning this for years.”

“It’s just so fast.” I hated how whiny I sounded.

“What’s really bothering you, Jayney?” Chris asked. “You’ve only ever complained about living here. I always pegged you as dead keen for adventure, so why—now that a *massive* adventure is around the corner—are you acting like such a mardy bum?”

I turned my hands over and over in my lap, studying them, too afraid to look Chris in the eye.

“I *do* want adventure,” I mumbled, “but it’s gonna be hard, that’s all. Like I’ve only *just* made a really great friend, and now I’m gonna have to leave her.”

“Tara?”

“Yeah.”

Chris gave me a sad, half-smile. “You know the world’s a whole lot smaller than it once was thanks to our mate, the internet.”

“I know,” I sniffled again, “but people get lazy.”

“Then don’t be lazy. You can still be friends with her if you put in the effort. It’s not like you have a boyfriend here.”

I shot him a glare, and he looked like he immediately regretted saying it.

Chris furrowed his brow. “You ... you don’t have a boyfriend here, do you?”

“No!”

“Okay, then, what’s the problem?”

I didn’t know what had come over me, but something about Chris’s kind-hearted brotherliness was making it hard to keep my defences up.

“Tara!” I blurted out. “Tara is the problem!”

Chris looked completely confused. “Why ... why is Tara a problem?”

My heart pounded against my ribcage. I’d said too much and gotten myself cornered. Was I about to lose the one person I had in this family? My confession was perched on the tip of my tongue, but it was still refusing to come all the way out.

“Jayney ...” his voice was soft and kind, and it made me feel a little braver.

“Because ...” I tried to force the words out. Nope, they wouldn’t come.

Chris looked on edge and his intense stare was burning a hole right through me.

“Because?”

I had to say *something*. “Because Tara likes you.”

It wasn’t *exactly* a lie, but it wasn’t the complete truth, either.

Chris pulled a face. “*Tara likes me?* She’s what, *sixteen?* I’m not a nonce, you know.”

“She’s *eighteen,*” I said, unamused, “and that’s not the point.”

“Well then, what *is* the point?”

I dropped my face into my hands and let out an overly dramatic half-groan-half-sigh.

God, I wanted to tell someone. And Chris was the obvious choice. The secret was eating me up inside, making my stomach churn pretty much twenty-four-seven. I could feel the words lingering in my held breath, dying to be spoken every time anything close to the topic was raised. But every time, without fail, the secret got stuck in the back of my throat and died there. It wasn’t something that was easy to bring up naturally in conversation, and Chris had just given me the perfect opening: “Jayney, if you’re worried about telling Tara because she’s got a silly crush on me, you really shouldn’t be. She’ll get over it, I promise—”

“Oh my god, it’s not that!” I cried. “The problem isn’t that Tara likes *you!* The problem is ...”

There I was again, unable to dislodge the stupid, bloody words.

“The problem is,” I said slowly and barely audibly, “the problem is that ... *I like her.*”

“Of course you do,” Chris said. “She’s your mate. But you’ll always have social media and ...”

I raised my head and glared at him. God, he could be dense sometimes.

“Bloody hell! Do I have to spell it out for you?” I snapped. “I *like* her. The same way she likes you, okay?”

The words hung in the air. The tension was wildly uncomfortable. My heart was pounding, and I could feel my armpits sweating like mad.

Chris was silent like he wasn't sure how to respond. Like he had no idea what the protocol was for this kind of situation—and honestly, he probably didn't.

“Oh my god, would you just say something?”

“Okay,” he said slowly, his voice a little strained. “That's fine.”

“I know it's fine, ya twat! I'm not asking for permission.”

“You said to say something!”

It was too much. The sob I'd been holding back rose to my throat, and I clapped my hand over my mouth to muffle it as it forced its way out. Chris darted across the space between us and sat on the edge of my bed. He reached out and put his arm around my shoulders. “It's okay, Jayney. I promise it's going to be okay. I love ya, regardless.”

The relief of having him know and still love me was almost euphoric, but I was sure he knew as well as I did what this meant.

I looked up at him. “Mam and Dad are gonna hate me.”

Chris's lips formed a straight, thin line, and he didn't say anything. He didn't even bother to lie. He knew.

“Does Tara really like me?” he asked. “Or does she like you?”

I snorted. “No, she likes *you* for some reason. She's never gonna like me.”

Chris sighed. “I'm sorry.”

“You can't tell anyone, okay?” I said, looking at him sternly. “Especially not Mam and Dad.”

“I swear, Jayney. I'd never.”

“Good. You heard what they said about Owen Fletcher. You know what they thought of Uncle John.”

“Funny how they don't mind taking his money, though.”

A thought struck me, and suddenly I was awash with grief. Not necessarily grief for Uncle John—who I didn't really remember—but grief for the relationship we may have had but now never would. *He* would have accepted me. *He* might have even loved me. My mind wandered back to the family who didn't.

"I don't think I can *ever* tell them about this," I sniffed.

"You just take your time, okay? I'm sure you will eventually."

"Not as long as I need a roof over my head."

"Hey," Chris replied, taking me by the shoulders, "if you tell them, and they kick you out, then I'll be going with you, Jayney. You know that, right?"

"Really?"

"I swear. If they ever decided they didn't want you as a daughter, they'd lose me as a son that same second."

I wiped my nose on my sleeve and let out another sob. "I love ya, you big dope."

Chris wrapped me back up into another big bear hug. "I love ya too, Jayney."

Chapter 7

Sydney, Australia, was quite literally half a world away from our flat in Terwich, and being cooped up on a cramped economy flight, sandwiched between Chris and the window for hours on end, I felt every single mile.

I'd never been outside of England before, not even to Scotland, which had only been a few hours from our front door. In fact, the drive to Heathrow was the first time I'd ever even been to *London*. Now here I was, flying to the other side of the world.

It had been five months and four days since Mam and Dad told us we were moving to Australia, and time hadn't felt real since. It didn't make sense, but when I thought about that day, it simultaneously felt like yesterday and a lifetime ago.

I barely slept the first night. I simply lay there, staring into the inky blackness of the void as a million thoughts ran through my mind. The prevailing thought being: I had to tell Tara I was leaving.

I hadn't been able to tell her right away. I'd waited a week. I told myself it was because I didn't want to ruin her birthday, but in reality, I was worried that when I told her, her disappointment wouldn't match mine and I'd be stuck facing the thing that I already knew. That she'd always meant more to me than I'd ever meant to her.

Eventually, I'd worked up the courage to invite her to Remy's. It seemed like the right place to do it, bringing our friendship somewhat full circle. She'd walked into the café with a beautiful smile on her face, and I was struck with the horrible thought that, in moments, I was going to be the reason that smile disappeared.

It hadn't taken her long to realise something was wrong, and I decided to rip it off like a plaster.

“Jayne—”

“My family's moving.”

“Where to?”

“Australia.”

“Australia? That's ... so sudden ... isn't it?”

I'd explained what had happened, and she'd sat there listening. I watched each tiny movement of her face, gauging her reactions as the words sank into her brain. And I felt sickly satisfied that she looked as upset as I felt.

I told her everything. Well, almost everything. Then she grabbed my hands across the table, and her eyes turned glassy as she told me how much she was going to miss me.

My stupid heart fluttered and my even stupider brain wondered if it was going to be a declaration of love. For a second, I considered telling her who I really was, but it wasn't the most ideal moment. Not while we were sitting there, tearing up and holding hands. Me blurting out the words “I'm a lesbian” would catch her off guard, and she probably didn't want to be implicated in my gay nonsense, so I kept my mouth shut. And it was a good thing too because she forced a smile and said something I assume she'd hoped would lighten the mood: “Who am I going to ogle at the rink with Chris gone?”

It would have hurt less if she'd stood up and punched me in the face.

“Suppose you'll just have to find someone else.”

I glanced over at Chris, who had his headphones on and was watching some boring-looking action movie. The bloody idiot had no idea how lucky he was. Everyone always said Chris and I looked alike. If I'd been a stupid straight man like he was, then maybe I would have stood a chance.

When the pilot announced that we were commencing our descent, I pressed my nose against the window. The glass was warmer than I'd expected. Even though it was July—which meant winter for the Southern Hemisphere—it was hotter than it had been when we'd left England. That didn't bode well for my first Australian summer.

Through weary, sleep-deprived eyes, I peered out into the morning sun, a little startled by the brightness. Sprawling out before me was the City of Sydney. The water below sparkled under the sun, surrounded by glittering skyscrapers and straddled by the famous Harbour Bridge. The white sails of the Opera House stood to attention on the shore, and hundreds of cars bustled through the streets of the city as morning commuters picked their way through the traffic. And for the first time since my parents told me about the move, as I laid my eyes upon the city that was now my home, I allowed myself to feel excited.

I'd done a little sleuthing into Bondi, and the most notable thing about it was the beach. Google Maps revealed we were only about a fifteen-minute drive from Sydney's gay district. Sure, a gay district was of no use to me as long as I remained in the closet, but the thought of a rainbow utopia sitting just over the hill was irresistible, and I promised myself that one day I'd manage to get myself out there.

Sadly, Uncle John's house was not one of the beachfront mansions I'd spotted as we drove through the streets of Bondi. Still, I wasn't one to be ungrateful. His house may have been on the quainter side—an older, semi-detached, red brick cottage with a small, manicured front garden—but it was, in fact, a house. And a nice house at that.

Standing on the front footpath, I could look down the hill and see the beach. And it wasn't like the rocky, dreary thing I'd visited in Middlesbrough a few summers back. It was an oasis at the end of the street. The little slice of paradise just beyond my doorstep. For anything the house lacked in size, it sure made up for in location.

When I stepped through the front door and wandered down the narrow hall, I found myself in a surprisingly spacious living area. It was as if Uncle John had been living in a TARDIS.

Apparently, Chris could read my mind because he looked around the space and said: “To quote every single Doctor Who companion, *it’s bigger on the inside.*”

The house was beautiful. It was old, but it had been restored and modernised, with polished timber floors and white plantation shutters covering the windows. It was light and airy and everything I’d ever dreamed of in a house. Living in the flat in Terwich had been like living inside a mausoleum, and I hadn’t realised how suffocating it had been until I stood in Uncle John’s house—my new house—finally able to breathe.

“He’d never have been able to afford this today,” Dad boasted, bumbling past me and Chris with his suitcase.

He sounded awfully proud for someone who was reaping the benefits of someone else’s hard work. He stood in the middle of the living room, surveying his castle like he’d made it at last. He’d *finally* gotten one up on Uncle John by simply outliving him and taking his stuff.

When Dad said we’d inherited everything from Uncle John, he meant *everything* because the house was completely furnished. Well almost. The room that would be mine was not. It had been used for storage and was still home to some boxes and random bits of furniture which didn’t belong anywhere else. I wasn’t about to complain, though. It was twice as big as my old room and was only one trip to the rubbish dump away from being perfectly habitable.

I set up the inflatable mattress that would serve as my bed until my furniture arrived, and I pulled out what few items I’d brought over in my luggage. My skating medals, some photos, some books, my skates ... Tara’s skates.

I pulled the newer, shinier skates out of the bag, ignoring my old, scuffed-up boots. As I held them in my lap, an oppressive feeling of loneliness came over me. A long, shaky sigh escaped my lungs like air let out of a balloon. I was so tired my eyes kept trying to close on their own, and I was sure that if I lay down, even for a second, I’d fall asleep. Although I’d been told the best way to beat jet lag was to avoid that.

A quiet knock landed on my door, and I threw the skates back into my suitcase. “Come in!”

“Hey,” Chris poked his head inside. “You settled in yet?”

“As much as I can be,” I said, gesturing at my inflatable mattress.

Chris glanced around the room, taking in the mess. “God, look at all this stuff.”

He stepped over a cardboard box, picking his way across the room and sticking his nose about the place. He ran his hand over a desk that had been shoved in the corner and rifled through a drawer.

“You shouldn’t be going through his things!” I whisper-scolded as if Uncle John could hear me.

“He’s not gonna mind, is he?” Chris had unearthed a photo. “Oi, look at this.”

It was Uncle John. I hadn’t seen him since I was seven, but I still recognised him ... even in drag. He was wearing a red feathered headdress and a little showgirl number with fishnets and heels. He was alive and jubilant in a sea of colour and leather and glitter, surrounded by flags and banners and other beautiful people who were taking gender boundaries and shattering them into a million pieces of confetti. I took the photo from Chris and read the writing on the back:

Sydney Mardi Gras, 2005.

It was the most flamboyantly gay photo I’d ever seen, but what struck me more than the sequins, feathers, and fringe was the massive smile he wore on his face.

“He looks so happy,” I mused, “he’s got so many friends!”

Chris chuckled. “Happier than Dad.”

I sighed. “I bet *he* would’ve understood me.”

“At least, in a way, he’s looking after us.”

“Still, I would’ve preferred he was here. He could’ve taken me to Mardi Gras. I could use another ally.”

Chris sighed and gave me a look of pity. “I’m thinking of going for a walk. Wanna come?”

At least a walk in the fresh air and sun would keep me from passing out. Also, my feet were itching to get a feel of that golden sand. I tucked the photo safely into my bag—rescuing it from a future in a landfill—and followed Chris out the door.

Mam was busy faffing about, setting up some bric-a-brac on a bookcase. Dad was asleep on the lounge, snoring so loudly it was a wonder the bric-a-brac didn’t fall back off. Chris and I slipped down the hall and out the front door before anyone had the chance to ask where we were going.

We set off down the hill towards the beach. The first thing I noticed was how brutal the sun was. It was biting my pasty skin, and I was worried I might shrivel up and combust after a few seconds under it. The second thing I noticed was how blue and clear the sky was. If an artist painted a sky so cloudless, you'd call them lazy for not including them. Everything was so bloody bright.

When we reached the esplanade, I felt a surge of energy, like my internal battery had been recharged by my proximity to the seaside. Before me, the crystal blue ocean roared, beating itself relentlessly against the rocks. The beach was littered with sun-bathing people of all shapes, sizes, and colours. You'd never know it was the middle of winter. I kicked off my shoes and held them as I ran down the concrete ramp, onto the beach, and towards the sea. The hot sand swallowed my feet, and the sea breeze raked its fingers through my hair as I ran. I hit the cool, smooth, ocean-polished shoreline and let the seafoam roll up to my ankles. Chris appeared beside me, reaching down to cup some water in his hands. He flung it at me, and I shrieked, giggling as I kicked water back up at him. A deep laugh that resonated from his chest burst from his throat, and suddenly nothing else existed. In that moment, we were kids again.

Walking through the sand began to feel like trudging through tar, and we realised our jetlag had overtaken our enthusiasm. We slogged back up to the esplanade and found an ice cream shop. Thankfully Chris had some Australian change in his pockets, so we bought a treat and settled on the nearby grass.

Chris sat with his legs bent at right angles, his elbows resting on his knees as he *bit* into his ice cream like a complete madman. "So, how are you doing, Jayney?"

I took a small scoop of my ice cream—mint choc-chip—and licked it from the tiny spoon. "I'm tired."

"We're *all* tired. I mean ... generally."

"Generally, I guess I've been better."

Chris dropped his head a little and sighed. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something to make it better."

I had to assume he was talking about the whole me-being-a-lesbian thing.

“Just knowing you have my back makes it a bit better,” I said, gazing out towards the sea. “How are you gonna get your hockey fix now? Unless the ocean freezes over, you’re shit out of luck.”

“I’ve got it all sorted.”

“Really?”

“I did research before we came.”

I squinted at him. “*You did research?*”

“It’s amazing what you can achieve when you actually care about something,” he said, smiling out of the side of his mouth.

“And what did your research uncover, Dr Bannister?”

“Well, I joined a group chat online with a bunch of lads who play *inline* hockey for a bit of a lark in a car park not far from here. The skills are transferable enough that I could join in if I liked. But I think I want to join a hockey *league*. Play for *real*.”

I was hardly surprised. “Where would you do that?”

“Well, there are two good options. There’s the ice rink that Mam’s going to work at in North Sydney. But there’s this *other* place, Randwick Rollerdom. It’s like, ten minutes away.”

I scrunched my brow. “Randwick what-now?”

“*Rollerdom*. It’s a *roller* skating rink. It’s brand new and state-of-the-art. One of the owners is a former world champion inline hockey player.”

“Wait,” I held up a hand, “you’re serious about this? You’re actually going to tell Mam that you’re leaving the ice *altogether* to join an *inline* hockey club?”

Chris sighed. “Jayney, I’m twenty-one. I’ve gotta stop being afraid of pissing off my mother—especially with something as petty as whether or not I’m an *ice dancer*. I’m not even any good at it!”

I smirked. “True.”

“Oi. Neither are you.”

“I’m better than *you*.”

Chris laughed. “Look, I figured coming here—where nobody knows me—is an opportunity to reinvent myself. Do what I want. Stop being a loser who doesn’t do anything other than what mummy tells him.”

I sighed. “I wish *I* could do that.”

“You *can*, Jayney. If I quit, you’re out a partner. And from what I hear, ice dancing lads here are in short supply. You said it yourself. Mam’s not gonna push you into solo dance when there’s no Olympic future there. Tara was teaching you jumps and spins. You could pursue that singles career you always wanted.”

I looked up at the sound of Tara’s name. I’d been trying so hard to forget about her, and the idea of skating without her was unappealing. “Maybe I should just pack it in altogether.”

“You serious?”

“Yeah. Like you said, new country, new us.”

“Well, don’t let me be the one who forces you to stop skating altogether.”

“No, I think you’re actually doing me a favour.”

Chris kept talking about his future inline hockey career, but I’d gotten slightly distracted. Loads of different people were walking by. The pavement was crawling with locals and tourists alike. But only one of them caught my eye. A girl who looked about my age, maybe slightly older. She had teal, shoulder-length hair that was poking out from underneath a glittery black helmet. She looked like she was floating, and when I looked down at her feet, I saw why. She was rolling along on bright purple roller skates with rainbow laces, and she was wearing big black kneepads covered in leopard print tape. She had on square, black sunglasses that looked a little too big for her small, round face, and she seemed completely oblivious to the fact she was in public. She slalomed along the path, grooving to music that the rest of the world couldn’t hear. She wasn’t wearing headphones. She was just free and unashamed.

And everything I wanted to be.

Chapter 8

“No! You’ve got to be kidding!” Mam’s cry was so pained, you would’ve thought that Chris had announced he was dying—or I’d confessed I was a lesbian.

But no, all Chris had said was, “I’m fed up with ice dance. I’m quitting.”

Why he'd decided to bring it up at tea, I had no idea. He'd said it so casually and so out of nowhere that even though I knew D-Day was inevitable, I nearly spat out my mashed potato.

Mam turned bright red, and her lips all but disappeared. "After all I've done for you, you're telling me you're *quitting*? You haven't achieved *half* of what we set out to do."

"Come on, Mam, we were never gonna. Let's face it. We're rubbish. *I've* never cared about ice dancing. It's always been *your* thing!"

He really *was* a new Chris.

"And what about poor Jayne?" Mam said, changing tack and turning on the sad doe eyes. "How is she going to dance without a partner? There are no boys tall enough for her."

Chris gave me a look, pleading with me to join the rebellion.

I chewed my lower lip and studied my mashed potatoes. "Um, actually, Mam. I ... I don't wanna keep ice dancing either."

Silence. I looked up from my plate to make sure Mam hadn't died from shock. Turned out she was just seething.

Dad was grinning like he was about to crack open a bag of popcorn. Mam looked like she was about to flip the table upside down.

"You don't want to keep ice dancing either?" Her voice was glacial. "And what do the two of you plan on doing instead?"

I stiffened my upper lip. I was an adult. I had to remember that. "Get a job, I suppose?" Honestly, I hadn't thought that far ahead.

Mam gave me a look that screamed, "You'll come crawling back!"

She turned to Chris. "And what about *you*?"

"Inline hockey."

Mam looked like she was about to faint. "Inline hockey?" You could hear the bitter taste the words left in her mouth.

"Good lad," Dad piped up at last. "About time you did a man's sport instead of mincing around like a nancy."

My eyes went wide, and I bit the inside of my cheek. Chris glanced at me across the table, a silent look of sympathy.

“I’ll have you know I won’t be paying for you to do *inline hockey*,” Mam said.

Dad laughed. “I bloody will.”

“Neither of you has to. I’ll get a job and pay for it myself.”

Mam’s narrowed eyes flashed back and forth between me and Chris, a storm cloud roiling her features. “I can’t believe I raised such ungrateful children! After all I’ve done for you. For *us*. And now you turn around and quit? Pathetic.” She spat out the last word, turning back to her tea. “You were beyond help anyway. I’m better off focusing on the young skaters. The ones with a future who actually have *talent*. Not a pair of has-beens—or rather, never-weres—like the two of you.”

“Would you relax, Jacqui?” Dad said. “As far as I’m concerned, the fewer ice dancers in this family, the better.”

“Oh, you would say that, wouldn’t you, Peter?” Mam bit back. “You’ve *never* supported my career!”

“Yeah, because I thought you’d bloody leave it behind after I settled you down.”

“Settled *me* down?! I settled *for* you!”

“Why’d you follow me here then? Oh, that’s right! My money!”

“*Your* money?! It was *John’s* money!”

I was relieved that the slanging match had been redirected away from me and Chris, but it was never pleasant being the net over which they served their sledges.

The soundtrack for the rest of our tea was Mam and Dad’s arguing interspersed with calm-before-the-storm silences that thankfully fizzled out when Mam left the table. She retreated into her bedroom and didn’t come out for the rest of the night. Dad slapped Chris on the back and once again congratulated him for not being a nancy before leaving the dining room to pass out in front of the television. Chris and I were left alone at the table.

“That didn’t go so badly,” Chris said.

“Are you kidding?”

“Did you ever imagine it would go any *better*?”

“Suppose not.”

Chris smiled a conspiratorial smile. “We’re free now, Jayney. She’s gonna focus on the stars of the future, and we’ll be able to do whatever we want.”

I smiled weakly. I wished I was as confident as Chris. At least he had something to fall back on, a contingency plan. Not only had he done his research, but he’d been emailing back and forth with the coach from the hockey club at Randwick, who’d invited him to come along to a training session. He was excited, and I was happy for him, but now I felt like I was floating out on a piece of sea ice all alone.

Chapter 9

With Mam preoccupied with building her reputation at her new rink with her new skaters, she wasn’t even *asking* what Chris and I got up to in our free time anymore. I’d always thought she was a *normal* helicopter parent, overprotective, but at heart, truly worried about her children’s safety. But no, she only seemed to worry about our safety when we were potentially worth something to her, when we were doing something *for* her.

Typical Jacqueline.

Chris and I had gained a little more freedom, but there was still one thing Mam wanted me to do. She and Dad had found a new church nearby. Apparently, it was held in a warehouse, and they played Christian rock music so loudly it drove the neighbours barmy. Mam had told me about the good-looking worship leader like he was some kind of selling point, but frankly, I’d rather listen to endless Tchaikovsky at ice dance practice than Christian rock.

I was a new person in a new country, and even though my hands had sweated and my voice had quaked when I’d told Mam I was quitting ice dancing, standing up for what I wanted had given me a rush, and I was emboldened to do it more often. My next move was to quit church. Chris had managed it. Why couldn’t I?

That announcement went over about as well as the ice dancing one had.

“First ice dance, now this?! Church is not a *sport*, Jayne. You can’t just *quit*,” she said to me that first Sunday morning when I informed her I wouldn’t be going. “What am I supposed to say when people ask me if my children are walking with the Lord?”

Tell them they’re not walking with. They’re running from.

I didn't dare say that out loud lest I risk a walloping. However, I was shocked by how confident I sounded when the words *did* come out: "Well, you could try telling the lord that your children are *adults* who can make their own choices."

"You are *eighteen years old*. That's *barely* an adult," she snapped back. "You may not be my athlete anymore, but you're still my daughter, and I have a responsibility."

"A responsibility to what? Make sure my soul is all good with the big man in the sky?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing myself say.

Mam looked like she was about to burst a blood vessel, but she didn't explode like I thought she would. Maybe she thought it was unbecoming to pitch a fit right before church. Maybe she thought the other churchgoers would see the smoke coming out of her ears and ask her a question she'd rather not answer.

She glanced at her watch, "Peter! Are you ready?"

Dad emerged from the bedroom looking as put together as he could manage, given his scruffy, greying beard and untucked shirt.

Chris appeared beside me in his pyjamas. It had been a while since he'd first quit church, but Mam still hadn't gotten over it.

She shook her head. "I don't know what's gotten into you two. One day you'll both be grateful I raised you the way I did. With discipline, and morals and God."

Doubtful.

She turned and opened the front door. "We'll talk about this when we get back."

But we never would. I'd make sure of it.

My Sunday mornings had opened right up, and I couldn't have been more pleased. Every week after Mam and Dad left for church (but not before Mam loudly lamented that us not being "right with the Lord" was "killing" her), Chris and I would head down to the beach. It hadn't taken Chris long to sell his ice skates and purchase some new inlines. He'd catch up with his new mate, Jason, who he'd met at the roller rink, and I'd tag along like a lost puppy until they ditched me to faff about in the skate park.

Initially, I was content to walk along the beach by myself. The first Sunday I shucked my shoes and sunk my feet into the warm, soft sand, it felt grounding. Like I was planting myself in

the place where I was going to thrive. But then I took a few steps and remembered how difficult it was to walk in sand, and the analogy began to unravel.

I had a lot to think about if I wanted to get my life in order. I needed a job. I had my inheritance, but considering how volatile my living situation would become should Mam and Dad find out I was a lesbian, I figured it was best not to put too big a dent in it, just in case.

Sometimes, I'd let the blue-haired girl I saw that first day roll through my brain. Her carefree aura. Her skates with their rainbow laces. I wondered if she was a local. I wondered if I'd ever see her again. I wondered if her rainbow laces meant what I thought they meant.

As stunning as Bondi Beach was, I could only walk it so many times before my feet got too itchy, and I needed a new outlet for my energy. By my third Sunday beach jaunt, it was all wearing a bit thin. I was about two seconds away from asking Chris if I could borrow his inlines when I noticed some action near the park. Construction workers and other people in bright yellow safety vests were setting up marquees and barricades and something that looked suspiciously like an outdoor ice rink. A young woman with a red lanyard around her neck was hanging posters nearby.

"Hiya," I called to her, "can I ask what this is?"

She stopped what she was doing and gave me a grin, "It's the Bondi Winter Festival!"

Was I supposed to know what that was?

The girl continued. "There's gonna be food trucks and live performances and a pop-up ice rink. It goes from tomorrow night through to the last weekend in August."

"Oh, amazing, cheers."

"No worries!" she replied, moving on to hang more posters. "I love your accent, by the way!"

A rush of adrenaline that I hadn't felt since the last time I'd skated with Tara jump-started my heart. I'd rather have both my legs hacked off with a skate blade than go to Mam's rink in North Sydney, but to ice skate in Bondi against the backdrop of the idyllic beach? My two worlds colliding? It sounded impossible. It sounded like a dream. It would only be a temporary fix, but it sure beat what I was currently doing: nothing.

I decided to make it my business to get out there and have a skate, and the following evening when the Winter Festival opened, I would be there at the ticketing gate, Tara's skates in hand.

Placing my blades back on the ice felt equal parts exhilarating and terrifying. Stepping out on the sloppily Zambonied surface felt similar to the wild ice of the Cumbria Lake, but my brain couldn't compute.

I'm ice skating ... at the beach? This is weird.

I took off, gliding around the ice, carving my own journey, dodging sprawling children and their penguin-shaped skating aids. With every stroke, I felt closer to being myself again. The air smelled a little sweeter, the ice felt a little smoother, my heart felt a little lighter. I turned, skating backwards, careful not to collect a small child. My space was limited, but I found the smallest of clearings. I couldn't help myself, like a kid in front of a pile of sweets. I had to try a jump. I set up for an Axel. I would have preferred the Cumbria Lake, but as soon as I was certain I had enough space not to flatten anybody, I leapt. Weightless. Free. Myself.

Thwack.

Wind rushed out of my lungs, and my right hip throbbed. The smacking of my body against solid ice was hardly unfamiliar, but it had been a while since I'd thrown myself into the ground, and I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. What had I done wrong? Had I not gotten my leg through enough? Had my lean been off? Was my air position wonky? I wasn't sure my snap felt quite as snappy as it once had. If I'd had Tara with me, she could have told me what the problem was. She was always kind with her corrections, but she never hesitated to call me out when I was doing something weird. I needed another set of eyes. I needed *her*.

I dropped down onto the bench and began unlacing my boots. With every hook I undid, I felt my heart break a little more. I'd thought being back on the ice would scratch the itch. It did for a bit, but it wasn't the same as being with Tara. There was so much I still didn't know about figure skating, and I didn't have anyone here to teach me. I'd have to let Mam take me with her to the North Sydney rink. I'd sooner walk down to the edge of the ocean and *keep* walking than do that.

I knew that's what Mam wanted—me crawling back to her. And I was never going to be her perfect little North Sydney ice dancer, *walking with the Lord*.

I pulled off my skates and shoved them into my bag, hiding my face as I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to blink back the moisture that was starting to form at the corner of them. When I opened my eyes again, the burning sun had been eclipsed. I sat upright, and when I saw who was dropping down beside me, I just about fell off the seat.

I couldn't believe it. She was wearing the same black sunglasses she'd been wearing the first time I saw her, and up close, I could see she had a septum piercing and an eyebrow ring. She stretched one arm along the back of the bench and crossed an ankle over her knee. She looked nothing like Tara and yet, somehow, I still found myself flustered by her close proximity. Apparently, my type was 'cute skater girl with a pulse'.

"You're bloody awesome out there." Her accent was broad, and her voice a little husky. And she *oozed* confidence.

My palms started to sweat. I wiped them on my leggings as inconspicuously as possible. My eyes flickered between her and the makeshift ice rink, too nervous to look at her face for too long.

"Oh ... thank you."

She turned her body towards me, still hugging the back of the bench with one arm. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Her arm wasn't quite around my shoulders, but it was bloody close. I forced myself to look at her, but I could feel my cheeks burning.

"That's what people keep telling me," I said, sounding a lot cooler than I felt, "although my house up the road says different."

She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head. God, her eyes were *gorgeous*. They were dark and curious, with a glint of cheekiness in them. "So, you're not here on holiday. That's good."

My heart began to pound like mad. "Why's that good?"

One corner of her mouth was quirked upwards, and she had a look on her face that made me think that *maybe* she was flirting with me.

"Just is," she shrugged. "Besides, the festival's only here for the winter. I need to teach you how to *roller* skate."

I suppressed a smile. "Do you now?"

"You ever tried to? Or are you strictly an ice princess?"

“Never.”

She let out a low whistle and shook her head. “Girl, you don’t know what you’ve been missing.”

She gave me another cheeky grin. “I’m Rhi. Short for Rhiannon, but don’t ever call me that.”

“I’m Ja—”

Jayne. It felt like my name belonged to someone else. Some ice dancing stranger who thought she was straight until she realised she was falling in love with her best friend—a girl who could never love her back. I wasn’t that Jayne anymore. I didn’t even want to *be* Jayne.

“I’m Jaz,” I pulled my new name out of thin air, but I liked it. The “Z” gave it the sort of pizzazz that *Jayne* was lacking.

“Short for Jayne,” I continued. “Well, not technically *short* for Jayne. It’s as monosyllabic as Jaz, isn’t it? Just ... don’t call me Jayne, and I won’t call you Rhiannon.”

Rhi laughed a hearty, joyful laugh that reverberated through her entire body. “Deal.”

Her joy was catching, and I found myself laughing along.

“I hope it doesn’t sound creepy,” Rhi said, “but I was watching you out on the ice and like ... if you’re that good on the ice, there’s no reason you can’t roller skate. They’re not *that* different.”

“I don’t have any roller skates.”

“You can borrow mine—” Rhi pulled back a little, looking me up and down, sizing me up. “Actually, no. You look *supermodel* tall. They’re not gonna fit you.”

I dropped my head, hoping she wouldn’t notice me blushing.

“I’ve got an idea,” Rhi said. “What are you doing th’s’arvo?”

I frowned and leaned in a little closer. “Sorry, what?”

Rhi shook her head like she was scolding herself. “My bad. What are you doing *this* afternoon?”

My heart leapt in my chest. Was I about to get asked out? My mouth was bone dry. “Nothing.”

“Not anymore.” Rhi grinned. “We’re going roller skating.”

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