

Lauren

I could see the figures whizzing past the narrow entrance to the ice. I approached the glass doors that opened into the rink, and I saw the girls' heads bob up just above the sideboards. Then, I *didn't* see them; they had moved down the ice, and I couldn't see them anymore. I inched forward to the double doors, leaned in close to the glass, and looked to the right. I don't ever remember seeing the kids from that perspective before—I was looking through the far corner of my eye, a sort of distorted peripheral vision. That view was not close or honest enough, so I slapped my hand around the door handle—the familiar metal was cold against my bare palm, making me cringe—and pulled the door open.

The damp, chlorinated air refreshed my senses as I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. My stomach turned over as I imagined I was striding out to skate again. The cold froze my throat and lungs as I breathed, causing a head pain like one I know from ice cream. This taste was *much* sweeter, though, and the pain was much sharper. I floated through the aroma toward the ice until I heard the loud clinking of steel and the cries of "Sarah's here!"

As soon as I opened my eyes I felt a spray of snow rise up my leg, and I saw little hands waving at me. "Thanks, Brad," I said sarcastically, as my friend stepped off the ice. "Preciate the snow.... Come here and give me a hug! I've missed you!" I threw my arms around his neck, stood on tiptoes, and squeezed his broad, strong shoulders. His heat felt good against my chest and arms, as I wasn't used to the chill of a rink anymore.

Brad has been a great friend of mine for years. We trained together, skated in shows together, and competed together. He and Heather and Maggie and I always hung out, as we thought the rest of the skaters at our home club,

who were younger, were too fickle and vengeful. Now Brad is skating pairs with a girl whom I cherish and look after as my sister because she reminds me so much of myself.

Brad asked, "How are you? Where have you been?"

"Good," I answered. "How are you?" Brad nodded a quick "OK," and I immediately continued. "How is Lauren? I haven't seen her in a while."

Brad turned around to face the ice and scanned the picture in front of him—from the right, to the left, back to the right, and to the left again. I followed the direction of his head with my eyes.... Finally, it stopped and faced one direction. Slowly turning my eyes toward the ice, I saw a strong skater in a familiar red and blue checkered outfit—one that I had once worn—form a perfect, elegant arabesque. As Lauren curved around the corner, I noticed that I didn't see her blonde ponytail hanging to the side as it usually does. I glanced at Brad as he stepped back onto the ice, then looked back at Lauren, who was doing a beautiful layback spin—perfectly centered, arching her back, and curving her arms above her chest at just the right angles—and I noticed her big, white, *plastic* head.

The chill made my bones ache, and I shivered. My chest tightened, and I tried to breathe. I tried to follow her figure across the ice, but it was blurred by the tears filling my eyes.

I hadn't seen Lauren since the accident, and no one had told me that she had to wear a helmet now. The accident was a few weeks ago; she and Brad were in an overhead lift when his blade hit a rut. He fell, and she fell further, crashing her face against the ice. She spent the night in the hospital and wasn't really able to eat for a week. After a year of dieting, she lost ten *more* pounds that week, much to her parents' dismay (and to our coach's

pleasure). Lauren dropped to sixty-eight pounds, and she thought it was a blessing.... This time she *couldn't* eat, and *no one* could *make* her. It looked as if every reed-like bone on her body would snap in two if she were to fall. Yet I knew she was thinking, *This will help our lifts*, because that's what I had told myself years ago.

She finished her spin, and I heard our coach yell, "Gorgeous!" She continued skating. As she skated by me, I saw the yellowish-green remnants of the bruise on her left cheek, and she blankly smiled. She knew what I was thinking about her because I had warned her about losing weight before, and she thought I was wrong. *Lauren, you are only making yourself weaker....* I knew that I couldn't convince her she was thin enough because no one could ever convince me that I was. So I wanted to yell at our coach and say, *Look what you've done to her! She's only twelve years old!*

I looked at Lauren again: a tiny frame topped by a big, white head, and I wondered *If only that helmet could protect her spirit, too.*

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