just like all those pretty lights

by ehj (casketcase), livelifeliving

Summary

everyone at the rink loves karolina. she’s professional and well-prepared and the complete opposite of trouble. trouble, in this case, takes the form of nico minoru. aka: the deanoru figure skating au.

Notes

it’s a little bit like stick it (on ice) minus being a criminal and a little bit like my life minus having nico minoru show up at my rink. fortunately nothing like ice princess. unfortunately nothing like blades of glory. like i, tonya but gayer and less violent.

See the end of the work for more notes
Karolina loves figure skating. She loves the chill that clears away the last bits of grogginess from her mind as she starts her early morning practice. She loves the feeling of the wind in her face as she glides along on the ice. She loves the burn in her chest after completing two four-minute programs back to back, muscles aching from well-timed jumps and spins and footwork.

But more than anything, she loves that nothing can touch her when she’s on the ice.

*Everything you do reflects back on the Dean family as a whole, Karolina.* Her mother’s voice telling her to be better and work harder can’t be heard above the sound of her blades against the ice and whatever playlist she’s put on for the session. *That song choice isn’t very suitable for a Dean, Karolina. You should do a more difficult variation there, Karolina.*

It all falls away until it’s only just her and the ice.

Karolina has been coached by her mother for as long as she’s been able to walk. Her grandfather was a national champion, and so was her mother. As an only child, it’s Karolina’s legacy to continue. Leslie Dean would accept nothing less. The Gibborim Ice Arena was their family’s pride and joy. When she was younger, that meant unlimited skating parties with friends and classmates, but once her mother saw that she’d inherited a natural affinity for the ice, it just meant more and more training time. She knows that with her mother as the face of Gibb, and with Karolina now competing at the senior level among the nation’s best, that that comes with some responsibility. Especially during an Olympic year.

Reaching Pyeongchang is what’s expected of Karolina, and she knows that. But she also knows that the shelf life of a female American figure skater can be rather short, and, another four years from now, skating’s new golden girls could easily usurp her. She knows there are eyes on her because she fits her sport’s mold so well: beautiful, young, well-spoken- American figure skating’s sweetheart with the pedigree to match.

She also knows its a label that comes with extreme pressure that has caused past women in her position to crack.

Everyone at the rink loves Karolina, or as she tells herself in moments of insecurity, they at least do a good job pretending. Every once in a while it makes her wonder if they’re just sucking up to the boss’s daughter or trying to get on the good side of one of the most sought after coaches in L.A. Karolina tries to not think about that, hoping that people like her enough to be genuine with her, hoping they don’t see her as sly and deceitful (albeit extremely successful) like they do her mother. She stays until the evenings to teach group classes to the beginner skaters, letting them follow her around afterwards, like little ducklings trailing behind, in awe of what they dream to one day become. She’s professional and well-prepared and the complete opposite of trouble.

Trouble, in this case, takes the form of Nico Minoru.

Karolina and Nico are no strangers to each other. The world of figure skating is a small one, and even smaller for those talented enough to be on the competitive track. With Karolina training in Los Angeles and Nico living all the way in Boston, their paths crossed for the first time when they were both 11 years old. They placed first and second at the national championship for their level that year, and it was the first time that season that Nico had lost. From that moment on, they were rivals, or as Nico seemed to view it, enemies.
But with an entire country between them, both Karolina and Nico were able to put each other out of sight and out of mind until competitions approached. And yet, just as Karolina is finishing up with lacing her skates, about to get on the 1:00 pm session, the door to the locker room opens and a familiar head of dark hair catches her eye. She freezes.

“Well, look who it is.”

Nico’s tone isn’t exactly teasing, although it’s not completely genuine either. It’s very much the norm for how they interact. Never going so far as to be disrespectful or unprofessional, but the tight-lipped smiles don’t reach their eyes. Karolina’s always found it unfortunate, but it seemed as though once she knocked Nico into second place seven years ago, the nature of their relationship had been set in stone.

It certainly doesn’t help that Leslie monitors her daughter’s friendships pretty closely.

“Nico,” Karolina says calmly but curtly.

The shorter girl takes a seat beside her and begins pulling her skates from her bag. It’s the strangest thing, seeing Nico with her guard down in a way—not dressed in flashy dresses and face mostly clear of the skillful makeup that usually paints it. But mostly it’s just strange because why is she here?

Karolina speaks again, and although it wasn’t her intention, even she can admit that this one comes out a bit rude.

“Why are you here?”

“To skate,” Nico answers plainly, holding up her jet black skates as though it were obvious. As though that were the question she were asking.

Karolina purses her lips.

“Right.”

She pulls on a pair of gloves and stands.

She doesn’t acknowledge the “See you out there,” that smugly follows her out of the room.

Karolina has already made a few laps around the rink, stretching and warming her muscles, when her mother appears in the penalty box. Karolina grabs her water off the wall as she rounds the corner and moves to stand in front of her coach and mother.

“Why is Nico Minoru here?” she asks.

Leslie raises her eyebrows and replies, “Nico Minoru is here?”

Karolina nods.

“Huh, I thought that was just a rumor,” the woman mumbles, her arms crossing her chest.

Her daughter’s head tilts to the side in curiosity.

“What was?”

“Picking up and moving cross-country.”

“Well why is she here?” Karolina pushes. “Who is she taking lessons from?”
“To train, I suppose,” her mom offers with a shrug, “and no one, as far as I know.”

Her brow furrows. That kind of spontaneity and change is a foreign concept to her. It doesn’t make sense. Nico has medaled at the last two national championships and is slated for her fair share of international competitions in the upcoming season. What reason did she have for doing all of this now? How could this possibly benefit her training?

“Regardless,” Leslie begins, drawing her out of her thoughts, “it’s none of your concern. Whether Nico Minoru is skating back in Boston or on the same session as you, your training stays exactly the same.”

Leslie pauses as Karolina returns her bottle to the boards before shrugging, her eyebrow raising as she looks at her daughter. “Who knows, having some competition around here might do you some good.”

As if on cue, the sound of ice spraying up to hit the sideboards causes both skater and coach to turn, looking at the girl in question as she comes to a stop. Nico looks at the pair expectantly, eyebrows raised slightly as though daring them to say something. But when no comment is made, she nods her head, directing her attention to Karolina.

“You mind if I put on some music?” she asks, holding up her phone.

Karolina’s mouth opens and closes, unsure of what to say--especially since she put on the new playlist she’d spent last night making not five minutes ago. She doesn’t want to cause problems though, and really, that sort of thing shouldn’t affect her training, so she nods.

“Sure.”

“Great,” Nico says with a smile. “Time to get this party started.”

Before she can say anything more, Nico is setting Karolina’s phone aside to plug in her own, and the sound of too loud guitar is blaring through the speakers.

“Think of it as an exercise in focus,” Leslie offers, her head tilting to the side as she watches Karolina take a controlled breath in, her fists balling at her sides. “If you can deal with her here, you can deal with her anywhere.”

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“Do you own anything that’s not neon? It’s too early in the morning to be staring at something so obnoxiously bright,” Karolina hears just as she stands, finally done with her post-morning-workout stretching.

She looks over at the girl before her, dressed in all black with her hair up in a way that she doesn’t think could survive a gust of wind, let alone a day of training, and a face full of dark makeup (so much for having her guard down) along with a coffee cup in hand as though she’s some girl showing up to the mall for her shift at Hot Topic rather than a professional athlete showing up to training. Karolina raises her eyebrows in equal parts puzzlement and disapproval.

“It’s after 11.”
“Which makes it morning. Glad to see that whatever private institution your online courses were coming from covered the same stuff as Massachusetts’ online public school.”

Karolina does her best to hold back an eye roll. She swallows hard before speaking.

“I saw that Eiffel had to drop out of Cup of China because of her ankle, and that you’ll be taking her place. Congratulations.”

“First international event as training mates,” Nico replies, raising her coffee in some kind of mock toast.

Before Karolina can form some sort of reply to the odd, half-genuine statement, Nico’s phone is ringing and she takes that as her way out. With a tight-lipped smile, she nods her head once and makes her way back to the locker room.

“You’ve been here for a day. I’d hardly call us training mates,” Karolina mumbles in frustration once she’s gone.

She surprises herself when she actually notices Nico hasn’t joined her on the ice 20 minutes later.

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Nico lets her phone drop into her bag with a heavy sigh. She had been taking some pretty big liberties in thinking that she could move cross-country, not have a coach, and have everything work out for her. Of course she’d planned on finding a coach eventually, but that required some trust and for that, she needed time.

Because the last coach she’d had broke up her parent’s marriage. And she had trusted them both. They’d jeopardized her career and had gone behind her back and lied to her and she’d had enough. She’s 18. She’s an adult.

So she left.

She’s filled out all of the paperwork to inform her sponsors and the skating federation and done her best to play by the rules. She still needs the money and the support. She doesn’t want to ruin this for herself. But she’d left the spot where a new coach’s name should be blank. Because she doesn’t have one. There are plenty of coaches in the country that’d give their right arm to take her on, and Nico knows that. But they just want the fame and attention and bragging rights that come attached to the girl’s talent and name. They don’t care about her. And she knows that too.

But apparently the people over at Team USA don’t make special “my dad cheated on my mom with my coach so I left in a fit of rage” exceptions. They need her to be in China next month, representing her country and her sport, and she needs to have a coach there with her. Those were the conditions. And saying no to the people in charge of deciding who got to go to the world championship every year probably wouldn’t do her any favors. Especially since she’s also gunning for the Olympics.

So now she’s got a week to figure it out.

Throwing her now-cold coffee into the trash bin, she lets out a groan.

“Tough day at the office?”
The question comes from a purple haired girl, who looked to be about the same age as Nico. She stands behind the front desk, her arms crossed.

Nico lets her head roll back, ridding herself of a kink in her neck. She shakes her head, letting out a tired sigh.

“You have no idea.”

Nico is about to turn and move into the locker room, but changes her mind at the last second.

“Hey, totally off the record, who would you say is the best coach here?”

Gert looks the blonde over for a moment, sizing her up before she responds.

“Leslie, definitely. They’re all good, but she’s the one I’d recommend if you can get in with her.”

Nico nods.

“I was afraid you’d say that. Still, thanks-”

“Gert.”

“Gert,” Nico repeats, before adding, “I’m Nico.”

The look Gert gives her tells her that she’s well-aware of who Nico is, but she appreciates being at a new rink and feeling a sense of normalcy rather than being eyed by strangers who recognize her.

“Nice to have you here at Gibborim, Nico. Let me know if you need anything. If this place is open, odds are I’m here.”

“Cool,” she says with a nod, and her smile widens a little. Because, aside from Karolina, this is the first person she’s talked to since her move. And, although she really couldn’t blame her, Karolina hadn’t exactly been all that welcoming. Not that Nico really wanted her to be, anyway.

Having been competitors for the last seven years had led to a lot of backhanded compliments and snark and stare downs, but in large part the reason they had never moved past that behavior was Nico’s fault. She was really competitive, and used to winning, especially when she was younger. So for this toothpick of a girl, lanky and quiet and unassuming, to have ruined 11-year-old Nico’s perfect season, had been unacceptable.

And truly, Nico couldn’t help but be jealous of Karolina. She came from a renowned skating family. She’d basically been born with a pair of custom-made skates on and had been raised to grow up in a way befitting of the skating community. All of that had been new to Nico and her parents when she had first started sliding around the kitchen floors in her socks at the age of four, and her parents figured that throwing that activity into something productive might be good.

Karolina is kind and considerate, and Nico is pretty sure she’s never rebelled once in her life. It’s a major reason why she’s never gone out of her way to befriend Karolina. Nico was the one who’d stay up late and occasionally sneak out of her room while away at competitions. Karolina was the one making trip itineraries since the age of 13.

So for the past seven years, Nico had seen her as her chief rival (and the pundits at Ice Network ate that shit up).

“Hey, uh, Mrs. Dean?” Nico calls as Leslie steps off the ice. She’s been at the boards for a while,
waiting for her chance.

“Nico.”

It’s the only indication she gets that the woman’s even noticed her.

“Do you have a minute?”

“To do what?” Leslie responds, not even making eye contact but instead typing out a message on her phone.

“To have a chat.”

“A chat?”

Leslie steps off the ice, one eyebrow quirked at Nico as she puts her guards on her blades. Nico figures there’s no point in stalling, and that she didn’t get this far in skating from a lack of confidence.

“I need a coach.”

Leslie looks up at her, and for a moment Nico thinks she’s going to straight up deny her request then and there. But then she nods once, and Nico understands where Karolina got that gesture from.

“Let’s go to my office.”

Nico follows, chancing a look back at the ice to see Karolina watching them with an unreadable expression.

Leslie closes the door behind them and takes a seat.

“Before I decide anything, I need the whole story. Why is Nico Minoru at my ice rink in LA in need of a coach far too close to the start of the season?”

Nico runs a hand down her front, trying to flatten her shirt that’s still wrinkled from being stuffed in her luggage. She’s not sure what she expected. She knew she’d need to inform Leslie Dean of what happened if she wanted to even be considered.

“Well, for starters I fired Janet.”

Nico becomes more intimidated at the lack of reaction Leslie has to that. She only glances at her phone and asks, “Any particular reason for that?”

“Yeah,” Nico replies, crossing her arms against her chest, hoping it comes off as a show of defiance rather than the nervousness and discomfort she’s feeling.

“I’m waiting.”

Nico sighs and averts her gaze to the floor. She’s never had to say it out loud before.

“She and my dad were sleeping together.”

The words leaving a bitter taste in her mouth, Nico glances up and catches the split second where Leslie’s eyebrows raise in surprise at the confession, but then she recovers and her face goes back to its neutral, stoic expression.
“Have you told your sponsors and the skating association that you dropped your coach and changed training locations?”

Nico nods. “Yeah, of course. But as I’m sure you can imagine, they don’t exactly want to see a blank space where a coach’s name should be.”

“Especially not when they’ve just put you on Cup of China.”

She nods and continues. “Exactly. In fact, if I don’t have a coach by the end of the week I lose my spot.”

Leslie nods, looking down at her folded hands that rest on her desk.

“Well look. My schedule’s pretty tight, and just because you’re Nico Minoru doesn’t mean I’ll take away from the students I already have. I think we can make it work, but stay away from Karolina. I don’t need her distracted right as the season’s starting.”

Nico has to physically fight the urge to roll her eyes.

“Yeah. I don’t think that’ll be an issue.”

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Nico pulls up to the Gibborim Ice Arena the next morning and almost laughs as she puts her car into park, remembering Leslie’s sole stipulation for taking Nico on as a student. 

*Stay away from Karolina.*

That was like asking Nico to please wear only black. If ignoring and steering clear of Karolina Dean was all she had to do to get her skating career back on track and keep everyone at US Figure Skating happy, then she was as good as gold.

Just as Nico unbuckles her seatbelt, she hears the buzz of her phone beside her. Was it her dad again, sending text after text of apologies? Or her mom reminding her that this move had better not mess up her training? Had the skating federation gone ahead and pulled her from Cup of China even though she still had a few days left to notify them she’d gotten a coach?

She quickly grabs it and checks the screen. She lets out a sigh of relief as she reads her screen. It wasn’t any of those things, luckily. Just the room assignments for Cup of China being sent out.

Swiping her finger across the screen, she unlocks the phone and begins to scroll through the email, searching for her name. Usually, she’d have gotten a say in who she shares a hotel room with at her international events, but because she was added last minute, she’s going in blind.

**Room 202: Karolina Dean and Nico Minoru**

*Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.*

Nico rolls her eyes and has to fight back a laugh because *of course* something like this would happen. She knows that this definitely won’t warm Leslie up to her any faster, considering it goes against the only condition she’d specified. But she also can’t help it. If Leslie wants to bitch to whoever was in charge of room assignments, she could go right ahead. As long as Nico has a coach
on paper to show her sponsors and the federation and a person standing at the boards in China next month, she could care less about the rest. She’d just be in the room to sleep and would avoid Karolina as much as she could the rest of the time.

With one earbud in and music blaring, she grabs her bag from the trunk and makes her way into the Gibborim Ice Arena, psyching herself up for the day’s practice. It’s not until she’s a few feet from the locker room that she turns down the music on her phone, hearing raised voices coming from the other side of the door.

“Karolina, it is your job to skate well. And it is my job to make sure you skate well.”

“I know mom, I just don’t think they’re going to accept-”

“Not if you don’t ask they won’t.”

“What happened to ‘maybe some competition would do you some good’?” Karolina asks, her voice parroting her mother.

“Well maybe if-”

Nico decides that now is as good a time as any to make her entrance, since there’s no sign of the argument ending anytime soon. Besides, she really needs to be getting ready to skate (partially because she wants to prove to Karolina that she can, in fact, make it onto the ice before noon). Plus, she’s never seen Karolina exhibit any emotions beyond fake happiness and extreme focus, and she’s kind of curious how pissed-off-at-mom looks on her.

She pushes open the door and lets her bag drop to the floor with a thud, announcing her presence. Her mouth curves into a smirk as she turns to face Karolina.

“Hey there roomie.”
Nico is whirling through her free skate program to Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite, landing every single jump flawlessly – textbook air positions, great height, full revolutions, and clean landings. Janet would have been singing her praises if she could see her now.

But Leslie Dean is a hardass.

Nico’s too focused on her program to sneak anything longer than a quick glance at her new coach, but she can tell by the blurry image of Karolina’s mother standing there with her arms crossed that she’s probably not impressed.

Nico ignores it, sets up for a triple lutz, and again lands effortlessly. She follows along to the music, the choreography to this piece ingrained in her head so deeply that she honestly wonders if she could do it blindfolded. She skates near the center of the rink and finishes the program in a flurry of spins.

And yet, Leslie does not look impressed.

“Good. But I need more passion. You need to emote. What were you and Janet working on with this program before you left?”

Nico shrugs. She already knows what Leslie is going to be griping about, and that’s that she’s not artistic enough. Leslie Dean won her national championships in ice dance and, as a result, has always pushed connecting with the music in her students. It’s why Chase Stein and his dance partner Molly train here. It’s part of why Karolina is known for her ability to bring a weeping audience to its feet. And it’s a big reason why Nico came out to LA. Emotion is not her strong suit.

“Honestly, we were really focusing on me landing a triple axel,” Nico replies, because she knows it might tide over Leslie’s frustration, knowing that Nico is one of the only women in the world to have that jump in her arsenal.

She catches the brief look of surprise that crosses Leslie’s face, but it immediately becomes stoic again.

“Well, that’s great, but you certainly won’t do as well as you have the potential to do, even if you land that.”

Nico knows that Leslie’s probably not wrong. The Americans have had trouble keeping up with Russia and most of Europe in international competitions, and a lot of that has to do with lack of emotion.

“Technical scores alone won’t get you far even if you do make the Olympic team,” reminds her.

“Well, the artistic side has just never been my strong suit.”
She knows that. Nico knows that Leslie knows that.

She also knows that that’s probably why her new coach is pushing it so hard so soon.

“Then work harder.”

Nico knows that at the end of the day Leslie is only trying to make her better. But it’s early, she’s still in the process of moving into an apartment considering she just decided to pick up and leave a week and a half ago, and Karolina is doing a terrible job pretending not to watch Nico working with Leslie while she warms up.

“It’s worked for plenty of others,” Nico grumbles.

Leslie sighs.

“And you’d rather just have American skating stay that way? Skating clean and tight with perfect jumps but not skating to the music?”

Nico turns away on her blades just so she can roll her eyes out of Leslie’s line of sight.

“Well then maybe I should ask Karolina since she seems to be much stronger with her component scores,” Nico shoots back, knowing her allusion to Leslie’s unnecessary rule will get a rise out of her coach.

It’s a dumb rule. She has no interest in bothering Karolina anyway. She’s competition, but she’s certainly not going to go ’94 Nationals on her.

Leslie is unamused but says nothing. The furrow of her brow is enough to convey the reiteration of her “don’t distract my daughter” rule.

“Again,” Leslie nearly whispers that small but fear-inducing tone that only a mother can produce, and Nico knows that Leslie is about to work her that much harder. “Try and use your facial muscles just a fraction of the amount you’re using the rest of your body.”

“Or I could show you that triple axel I mentioned.”

“After. Go again.”

Leslie presses play, and the soft opening of Firebird begins to fill the rink. Nico skates along, this time at least trying to feel out the music. She doesn’t want to make Leslie too upset, as annoyed as she is with the coach. But the music is soft and so not Nico that she can’t really figure it out. She’s about halfway through and ready for the rest of the orchestra to come in loud and urgent when Leslie skates toward the middle and flags her down.

“Stop, stop.”

Nico sighs but skids to a stop and comes speeding toward the center toward Leslie, who is visibly frustrated.

“I know that this isn’t something we can fix in a day, but I need you to at least start trying. Think of what the song means, what it’s about. What does it mean to you?”

But honestly? The song means nothing to Nico.

“I don’t know.”
Leslie pinches the bridge of her nose.

“How does the music make you feel?”

Nico’s even more frustrated now. She really doesn’t even know why Leslie is bothering to put so much time with her. She thought she’d made it pretty clear that she just needed a name on a sheet when it came to coaching, that it would be more of a formality.

“This song is a classic, Nico. Feel it.”

“I don’t know what else you want me to do,” Nico sighs.

“Think about how the music moves from soft and slow to loud and thundering! Skate to the music,” Leslie replies, punctuating her words with increasing and decreasing volume and hand gestures that makes Karolina stop and pretend to be checking her phone.

Nico’s bored. She hates this song. She can’t feel anything to it and doesn’t want to anyway. The last thing she needs is to bring all of her family bullshit to the one place she’s able to feel just a little bit freer.

“You know, I didn’t ask for this,” Nico finally responds. “I just needed someone to put down as a coach for now and was going to figure out the rest later. I know these programs.”

That makes Leslie visibly angry.

“Yes, you did ask for this.”

“I’m sorry I don’t—”

“When you asked me to attach my name to yours and put you out at competitions, I took that seriously. I take my reputation seriously. So it’s my job to put out the most competitive athletes that I can. If you would like me to find you a coach who will sit back and let you train yourself and not reach your full potential, I’d be happy to arrange that, although I’m not sure how the skating federation would feel about needing to inform them of yet another coaching change just weeks from competition.”

Nico clenches her jaw and refuses to avert her eyes from Leslie’s.

They soften just a bit as she continues, “You’re a force, technically, Nico. But there is no reason for you to just stop there at the height of your career. Do I make myself clear?”

Nico nods in response.

“Run it again.”

Nico does her best to put her anger into the music, but that’s difficult when the only emotion she feels comfortable expressing on the ice doesn’t match the music. Maybe she should ask Leslie to switch to something else because clearly, the woman wasn’t going to let this go.

She pivots on her blade so that she’s moving backward, picking up speed along the wall as she goes. Nico spots Karolina, whose standing stock still at the boards to give her ample space. She’s still doing her best to pretend she’s not watching, but Nico knows better. Karolina isn’t the slyest person in the world.

Nico ignores the fact that she’s skated her best when Karolina is watching when Leslie comments
that her run-through this time was better.

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She’s good. She’s so, so good. Karolina wonders when was the last time Nico missed a jump as she watches from the boards, playing with the cap of her water bottle.

Karolina knows that she’s always had the edge artistically but she can’t help but be jealous of the consistency of her competitor’s jumps. She also can’t help but be just the slightest bit annoyed that she has to split her mother’s attention with Nico.

“Checking out the competition, huh?”

Karolina jumps when she hears a voice behind her and realizes she hadn’t even noticed Chase Stein skating up alongside her.

“What?” Karolina looks at him confused for a moment. He gestures over to Nico, who’s now in a spin, and she puts together what he’d said.

“Oh, um, yeah.”

She really hopes Chase doesn’t think she’s staring. She’s not. Karolina doesn’t care… that much.

“So when did she get here?”

Karolina shrugs, still wondering how she zoned out so hard that she didn’t even notice Chase’s presence.

“Oh, just a couple days ago. Still don’t really know why. My mom wouldn’t tell me.”

Chase lets out a heavy sigh at that.

“Yeah, well the whole world is gonna know soon. It’s just a scandal waiting to happen.”

Karolina turns toward him, confused, to see the grimace on his face.

“Nico’s dad is sleeping with my mom,” he mumbles, devoid of any emotion.

Oh. Oh. Well, that… isn’t entirely unexpected. Nico’s parents had always spent a lot of time with Chase’s, both on and off the ice.

Still. She can’t imagine it’s fun to be reminded of it even if he does live across the country.

“Oh my god. Chase, I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs, trying to seem nonchalant about the whole thing. But Karolina knows that even though he barely sees his parents much anymore since the Yorkes family has basically adopted him once he moved out here to live with them and skate with Molly, it still bothers him.

“Out of sight, out of mind, honestly. And Nico’s so above my mother’s capabilities as a coach.”

“But still…”
He cuts her off.

“My dad’s a dick to both of us, so honestly he had it coming. That’s their shit to work out.”

Karolina hears him take a deep breath and watches him close his eyes. She really doesn’t know how her friend can be so relatively calm about all of this. Then again, as much of a stereotypical teenage jock he is, she knows it also takes a certain level of maturity to reach an elite level in any sport.

“Anyway, everyone’s trying to figure out why Nico suddenly moved, so it’s only a matter of time before it comes out.”

“Wow, no wonder she’s been especially broody lately,” Karolina quips.

Seriously though. Even the attitude she was giving Karolina’s mother earlier suddenly makes so much more sense.

(Not that Karolina thinks that her behavior is excusable.)

“She’s really not that bad, K. We spent a lot of time together growing up.”

“So have we.”

Karolina can almost feel Chase rolling his eyes at her. He did spent a lot of time with Nico when they both lived in Boston and were coached by Chase’s mom, and she knows that even though now they only see each other at competitions, they’re still kind to one another. Even though Karolina’s not sure she’s ever seen Nico Minoru smile during a situation that doesn’t involve receiving program scores.

“Well, maybe this new arrangement will be a chance for you two to start over.”

“I don’t think Nico’s interested.”

Not that Karolina’s all that interested either. But maybe if Nico showed even just the tiniest bit of interest in getting to know her, she’d bend.

“Stare any harder, and I think you’ll give yourself a migraine.”

She’s not staring. At least that’s what Karolina tells herself as she finally tears her eyes away Nico floats through her step sequence.

“I’m just not used to sharing my mother with other elite singles skaters. She hasn’t taken on someone new for a couple years.”

Chase smiles at her kindly, and Karolina swears he takes a glance down at her lips. Oh. That’s weird.

“Well, you don’t have to worry. You’re still the best one here.”

He says it with such sincerity that it really throws her off. He’s not… surely he isn’t coming onto her? No, he’s just being nice. Just a good friend. A pal. A bro.

“Well, thank you, Chase,” Karolina replies politely, trying to avoid his gaze.

“I mean it,” he continues, and he reaches out to place his hand on her shoulder. It’s not weird. She’s not uncomfortable from this touch—they’ve been close friends for years. But it’s the way he’s looking at her now. It’s different from previous interactions.
“Everyone here loves you and sees you as captivating… beautiful.”

Oh.

Karolina’s not really sure what her face is doing, but she must look confused or unhappy or something because immediately, Chase’s eyes widen and he backpedals.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t trying to make things weird. I just—”

“No, no. It’s fine. Thanks.”

Except it’s not fine because Karolina can’t figure out why she’s so put off by Chase very obviously flirting with her. He’s a wonderful guy, a close friend, objectively very attractive. Society has made her feel like this is something she should be flattered by or proud of. But she’s not.

Karolina wonders if it’s weird for her to think that.

//

Nico awkwardly shuffles into the locker room, her thighs burning from running her program what seems like a thousand times. Trying to balance on her skates as she walks doesn’t help either. She spots Karolina on a bench, back facing Nico, humming along to whatever song is playing on the one earbud she has in.

Nico plops down on the other end of the bench with a sigh and begins to unlace her skates when Karolina takes her other earbud out and turns to see Nico sitting on the other end. Nico sees her pretend to reach for something in her bag and turn away again.

“What, saw it was me and decided to ignore me?”

Nico’s messing with her more than anything, even if it does hurt just a little bit to see Karolina so blatantly avoid her. It’s the nature of their relationship, but Karolina could at least try and give somewhat of a nice Gibborim welcome.

“No, just figured I would say hi. But then I saw it was you, and I doubt you want to make awkward small talk.”

She really can’t argue with that. Nico isn’t even supposed to talk to Karolina anyway.

“I mean, you’re not wrong. And typically the only locker room talk I engage in is complaining about coaches. But I can’t really do that when said coach is your mom.”

Nico almost takes pride in the fact that the comment gets a smirk out of Karolina.

“She’s only trying to make you better, you know.”

Nico knows that. She knows that, but she wishes people would stop telling her that because she really didn’t ask for it.

“I guess I just didn’t expect to receive the star treatment when I got here,” Nico quips.

“Yes, I’m sure you thought my mother was going to be so upset to have Nico Minoru come to her
looking for a coach in an Olympic year.”

Nico can’t help but wonder if she’s ever had this long of a conversation with Karolina.

“I’m sorry about what happened, by the way,” Karolina says. She must immediately see Nico’s brow furrow because she quickly adds, “Chase told me earlier.”

Of fucking course he did.

“Well tell Stein to mind his own business,” she grumbles, stuffing her skates into her bag quickly and storming out.

Nico makes her way to the front desk where she sees Gert, who is shooting daggers at Karolina, who must have followed her out of the locker room and is now talking to Chase. She can see Gert huffing about something to the girl next to her, who she’s pretty sure is Chase’s ice dance partner, Molly.

“You doing okay, Gert?” Nico asks as she approaches the counter.

“What? Oh—yeah. I’m fine. I just got a...a paper cut.” Gert holds up a finger. “Blades aren’t the only dangerous thing around here, am I right?”

“Uhh,” Nico starts, looking at Gert, thoroughly confused and slightly concerned for the girl. She then turns to the curly haired brunette to her side, noting that she’s making a face that has got to look pretty damn similar to her own.

“So she do this a lot?”

Gert lets out a scoff, surely about to defend herself with some other bizarre cover before the girl interjects.

“All the time.”

Gert rolls her eyes, giving the girl a small shove across the counter. “Nico, this is my baby sister, Molly.”

“Please, I’m only three years younger than you.”

Nico chuckles to herself, thinking back to how she and her sister Amy used to act just like that. Her smile quickly fades, and she clears her throat, eager to change the subject before the conversation shifts to herself. She looks out at the rink and sees a guy, one that looks like just about every white, private school lacrosse bro back in Boston. Of course that was what Chase Stein would grow up to look like. He’s standing with Karolina and Nico watches as the blonde’s lips spread into a smile, and she starts to laugh.

“So what’s Chase doing here?” Nico asks, not looking back to the girls at her side.

“Chase Stein? He’s trained here for years,” Gert answers, although Nico’s pretty sure she hears a pencil snap halfway through her answer.

“He’s got a thing for Karolina,” Molly adds, leaning over closer to Nico as she does so.

“Molly—”

“Well, it certainly looks like he does.”

“A boy and a girl can speak to each other without the heteronormative pressures of society to link
them romantically,” Gert snaps.

Nico raises an eyebrow at Molly, who meets Nico’s gaze with a smirk. Gert almost seemed… jealous.

Molly turns to Nico.

“Anyway, how do you know Chase?”

She shrugs and answers, “Oh, I don’t know him so well now, but we spent quite a bit of time together considering we used to both be coached by his mom. Then he came out here to be coached by Leslie when we were 13.”

“And became my dance partner and flirts with Karolina whenever he gets the chance,” Molly adds.

Nico hears Gert sigh, and she turns toward Chase and Karolina, who are still talking.

“And you should really be getting out onto the ice so that he has less time to do that,” Gert snaps.

Nico thinks that Gert certainly isn’t trying very hard to hide how she’s feeling. Molly walks away and heads towards Chase and Karolina.

She sees Chase walk away from Karolina with a smile and a wave, and Karolina gives the same fake smile she’s given Nico for years at competitions. Hmm.

“For what it’s worth, if he’s flirting with her, she doesn’t really seem all that into it.”

Gert scoffs at that and responds much too quickly.

“I don’t care. Chase Stein is free to date whomever he pleases. He can date you, for all I care.”

Nico just chuckles at that.

“No thanks. He was like my brother growing up.”

“I didn’t realize you two had been so close.”

They had been. Nico had been coached by Janet since she was 8, and since she and Chase had been the same age, they’d been around each other a lot in skating lessons when they were younger and competitions as they grew up. Janet and Nico’s parents had even tried to get them to skate pairs when they were younger until they realized that Nico didn’t work well with others. Chase wanted to go the ice dance route, and with top notch facilities in their area lacking, he’d moved out to LA.

She’s annoyed that he revealed her reason for moving out here to Karolina. It’s none of her goddamn business. But Nico does still wonder how he’s been, how he’s handling the whole thing with his mom cheating with her dad. Nico wonders if he’s upset with her. Maybe if she’d switched coaches sooner or had a different coach in the first place, it never would have happened. Maybe Chase wants nothing to do with her.

“Yeah, well like I said, it was a while ago. Probably a completely different person now. I really haven’t talked to him much since then.”

“Well,” Gert begins. “It might be nice to start putting down some roots here and bond with some of the skaters. We’ll all be spending a lot of time together.”

Unfortunately true.
“Maybe you and Karolina can finally be seen as friends and not just rivals. You know, support your local girl gang.”

Nico nearly chokes on her water. One two minute conversation was enough to last them another five years.

“No, that won’t be happening. Leslie will make sure of that.”

“What do you mean?”

Nico rolls her eyes.

“Her one stipulation for taking me on as a student was to stay away from Karolina. Probably worried I’d corrupt her innocent little child.”

“Yeah, she always has been the annoyingly perfect ‘all-American’ girl,” Gert mumbles.

Nico raises an eyebrow, surprised to hear Gert make a negative comment about her boss’s daughter.

“So you’re not a fan either?”

Gert shrugs.

“I try not to drag other women down and more try to empower them, but girls like Karolina can make it difficult. She’s not a bad person by any means, but…”

“You’re jealous.”

“What? No. That’s crazy.”

“That broken pencil from when you saw her talking to Chase says otherwise.”

Gert shrugs, busies herself with whatever form she was in the middle of filling out when Nico had walked up.

Nico just smiles at the girl and can’t help but feel bad for her.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything.”
three

Chapter by ehj (caskettcase)

Chapter Notes

hi we love you all sorry this took a little longer. life happens. apologies if there are grammatical mistakes we forgot to fix.

Nico races in from the locker room to the rink as fast as she can with her guards on as she spots Leslie with her back turned, probably talking to the parent of another skater. She groans when she sees the Zamboni out resurfacing the ice.

Nico looks closer and spies purple hair sticking out of the driver’s seat, and she takes her guards off and skates over to the machine, slowing as she reaches Gert, who peers down with wide eyes when Nico slams her hand against the Zamboni to get her attention.

“What, you want to try driving it?” Gert yells over the sound of the vehicle.

“No. I’m avoiding Leslie.”

Gert stops momentarily and gestures for Nico to join her.

“Say no more. Come on up.”

Nico squeezes in closely next to Gert, careful not to step on her with her blades in such close quarters.

“So you do this a lot? Just let the skaters drive around with you in this thing?”

Gert smiles.

“You know, I used to. Until Leslie caught Chase in here with me.”

Now that sounded like an interesting story.

“Interesting.”

Gert groans and rolls her eyes, knowing what Nico is implying.

“Oh, shut up. Molly would ride around with me too.”

“Ah, but never Ice Princess?”

“Yes, Karolina Dean. That rebel.”

Nico smirks and asks, “You ever see her talk back to Leslie? Or get angry? About anything?”

“Well, the look on her face when you showed up a couple weeks ago was pretty entertaining.”

That was true. That was also the coldest she’s ever seen Karolina in their interactions. Probably a
combination of the shock of seeing Nico there and knowing that her face had probably gone completely pale when Karolina had seen her.

“Is that so?”

“Oh, for sure. I still don’t understand the deal with you two.”

Nico rolls her eyes. She likes Gert. She likes hanging out with Gert. But she doesn’t like that Gert asks why she and Karolina don’t like each other during almost every single conversation that they have.

“There is no deal,” Nico grumbles. “We’re just competitive.”

“Seems like more than that.”

“We’ve just been competing against each other for years. Ever since we were at the intermediate level, we’ve just risen up through the ranks at the same time and always competed against each other.”

Gert turns toward Nico and shoots her a look. “I mean competitors is one thing, but you two have crossed over into full-blown enemies.” She turns her head to the side and then finishes, “How did that happen?”

Nico leans back in the single seat she shares with Gert, crossing her arms over her chest. “I was 11, and it was my first really important competition. Hell, even my mom got excited when I’d qualified for it. I’d won every competition that season, but this was the only one that mattered. And then Karolina Dean showed up with her famous figure skating family and her perfect life and got the gold.”

Gert rolls her eyes, taking her eyes off the ice before them for a second to look over at Nico incredulously, “Okay, but you guys were 11. It’s been years.”

“So? I was mad about it. I’d gone out there and skated my ass off, and somehow it still wasn’t enough. I couldn’t help but feel like the judges’ minds had already been made up. So I made it my goal to beat her every time that next season- to be so much better than her that they had no choice but to give it to me.”

“And it’s continued to be your goal ever since,” Gert adds.

She sighs and wishes Gert would just change the subject already. She’s already gotten more personal than she’d wanted. She has no interest in mending any sort of relationship with Karolina like Gert is trying to do for her. Nico and Karolina aren’t friends. Only competitors. That’s it.

“Whatever. I just think that in a sport rattled by abusive coaches, young athletes being pushed too hard or driven into inpatient facilities for their mental health, and some seriously stuck-up attitudes, it would be nice to see everyone doing better at supporting each other.”

“And I do support everyone. I support Molly, Chase, you. I support Alex Wilder. I said hi to that Eiffel chick once. I support a lot of people.”

“Just not Karolina Dean.”

No, just not Karolina Dean.

It was hard for her growing up, watching Karolina Dean being groomed into a future Olympic
favorite from a young age. Watching her movie star father and champion ice dance mother raise her with all the best coaching and resources that money could buy. Showing up to competitions and being greeted by crowds of adoring fans. Seeing how even though Leslie Dean was insanely tough on her daughter, they still seemed to be the perfect little family at the end of the day. Their sole focus was skating. They didn’t seem to have any problems because there didn’t seem to be anything else besides the ice.

“You have to understand that it’s not easy to watch someone grow up with a seemingly perfect childhood.”

“Oh, right,” Gert snorts. “Leslie Dean is a shining example of a great mother.”

“No, but Karolina was basically born with silver blades on her feet.”

Gert stops the Zamboni in the middle of the rink.

“I understand,” she says sincerely.

Nico lets out a hollow laugh.

“No, I know you mean well, Gert, but I don’t think you do.”

“My parents have sacrificed so much so that Molly can skate. You think my first choice of working through high school is basically running the day-to-day tasks of a giant ice rink?”

No, probably not. As much as Nico likes Gert, she realizes she really doesn’t know all that much about her, other than Molly Hernandez is her adopted sister, and she’ll never admit her crush on Chase Stein.

Nico also realizes that Gert probably knows nothing about her.

“My big sister Amy died by suicide when I was 14. I found her with a bottle of pills in her bedroom one morning. After that, I threw myself further into skating. I started homeschool and just kind of withdrew. My whole family did honestly. Things just weren’t the same after that. Maybe that was kind of the beginning of the end of my parents’ marriage, too. I don’t know.”

It’s been four years, and it still feels like an open wound. All the people crowding into the funeral home, all the family therapy sessions, all the condolences from people she barely knew. And what do you say to that? Nico thinks. Thank you? Thank you for reminding me about why I’ve been in a fog for the past few weeks? Thank you for telling me that suicide isn’t a sin and that Amy will be in whatever version of the afterlife you think is real?

So Nico stopped going to therapy the first chance she got and threw herself into skating.

“Nico, I’m—”

She shrugs and gives Gert a sad smile.

“I didn’t tell you to make you feel bad. But we know now that we both have shit we’re dealing with.”

Gert nods, and a soft smile slowly spreads across her lips. “I’ll be damned. Cold, brooding Nico Minoru wants to be my friend,” she jokes, bumping Nico with her shoulder.

Nico can’t help but smile.
“Only because you’re the least insufferable one here.”

They both laugh until Nico hears the sound of skates hitting the ice, and someone below stops sharply and sends a spray of ice towards the huge machine.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stein. I am resurfacing the ice.”

“Looks to me like you’re just harboring a fugitive.”

Chase gives Nico the same toothy, youthful smile she remembers from years ago.

“Good to see you again, Nico.”

She’s pissed at him. She should be pissed at him. Because he had no fucking business telling Karolina about their parents.

But she’s missed her friend. She hasn’t seen him since Amy’s funeral. Nico still remembers breaking down when she saw that Chase had begged his parents to fly him back to Boston for it.

She misses having a sibling figure in her life.

“You too, Chase.”

He smiles even bigger and then turns to Gert.

“Now, Gert, I’m going to need you to either put that thing away or find me a spot in there with you two.”

“Unfortunately I think I need to put this back before Leslie sees you out here talking to a machine.”

He shrugs and answers, “Suit yourself.”

Gert pushes at Nico a bit, making a shooping motion as Nico gets up to move.

“Okay, Nico. Out.”

She climbs down from the Zamboni, Chase offering her a hand to make sure she doesn’t slip. She waves at Gert as the machine roars back to life and then turns back to Chase.

“Welcome to Gibborim,” he offers.

“Figured it was time for a change,” she replies casually.

It’s awkward. She loves Chase, but this is awkward. He scratches at the back of his neck and looks down, twisting one of his toe picks into the ice. (Gert’s going to kill him for that.)

“Hey, so maybe we should—”

“Karolina told me you told her about our parents.”

She can’t help herself. If they’re ever going to be as close as they were, Nico needs to get that out there. Chase grimaces and keeps looking at the ground.

“You and Karolina friends now?”

Nico scoffs.
“God no. She just mentioned it to me to offer her condolences or whatever.”

“Look, Nico. I’m sorry.”

He finally looks back up at her as he says it, and she knows he’s hurting too. He can try to hide it all he wants, but Nico still knows Chase.

“I wanted to ask if you’d like to get coffee later? There’s a place not too far from here that we hang out at a lot. Just to catch up?

Nico feels guilty again for just a moment, running through the what-if I hadn’t started taking lessons from Janet bit again. But Chase doesn’t blame her. In fact, he wants her around. So she smiles and nods.

“That’d be nice, Chase.”

Gert has since put the Zamboni away, opening the ice to the club’s skaters. Nico spies Molly and Karolina laughing as they join the two on the ice, Karolina’s eyes following Molly as she begins to skate toward her and Chase.

“Time to get to work, I suppose. We’re all leaving for Cup of China in two days,” Chase says.

“Molly’s first international event,” Nico adds, nodding at the young girl who has now joined them. “Congratulations, by the way.”

Molly gives just about the brightest beaming smile that Nico has ever seen, along with an enthusiastic, “Thank you!”

She can’t help but smile back at her. The girl’s excitement is infectious.

“I’ll see you later then?” Chase asks as Nico turns to skate away.

“I’ll see you later, Chase.”

//

The sharp smell of espresso fills the cozy atmosphere of Timely Coffee as Karolina lounges in an upholstered chair, Gert and Molly across from her as they complete their online homework.

She’s scanning through the neuroscience chapter of her Psychology textbook when she swears she hears a familiar voice as the door opens.

A laughing Nico Minoru and an equally amused Chase Stein.

“Hey, is that Nico over there?” Karolina asks, Molly looking up as Karolina nods in their direction.

“Depends,” Gert responds, still staring at her laptop. “How thick is the eyeliner?”

“Thought you were all about building up other women.”

Gert stops typing and looks up.
“And your conventional standards of beauty drilled into you by our society are making you assume I was saying something negative. Never said it was a bad thing. And Nico’s a friend. I would never be malicious.”

Karolina has had the feeling for a few days that Gert is mad at her, and she can’t figure out why. Or maybe Nico is replacing her.

“So you two are pretty close then.”

Gert shrugs, a soft smile on her face as she looks at Karolina.

“I like her.”

Then her expression becomes a little more pointed as she continues, Molly nodding along in agreement as she does.

“And I’m tired of both of you seeming to be confused as to why I’m friends with the other. Neither of you two are bad people. You honestly have a lot more in common than you think. I mean, you already could’ve related to each other with the whole Olympic hopeful, nationally competitive skater with USFS up your ass at every turn. Now you’ve got the same training rink and coach on top of it. Why continue to let your initial impressions of each other as kids be your lasting impressions?”

“What did Nico say about me?”

Gert throws up her hands and sighs.

“That’s seriously all you got out of this?”

It’s weird having someone who’s so close to both her and Nico. Living across the country made it pretty easy for them to run in different circles, but these close quarters are something new. What if Nico starts turning the whole rink against her?

“For your information, it was nothing they wouldn’t mention during an NBC puff piece about your rivalry.”

Or maybe she’s being too hard on Nico, expecting too little of her. Gert had a point—their whole relationship was based on snap judgments from when they were 11. Maybe they deserve better than that.

“Look, I’ve told Nico this, and I’ll tell you the same. You’ve competed against each other for years and seem to hate each other for no reason. Get over it.”

“I don’t hate her.”

And she doesn’t. But maybe the only way to keep Gert happy is for Nico and Karolina to actually make an effort to not ignore each other whenever they’re in the same room.

“Right,” Gert answers. “You’re just butthurt about how you have to share a room with her at Cup of China.”

“Yeah, because I’d rather be rooming with Molly. Because I know Molly better.”

“Then here’s a great chance to get to know Nico better,” Gert replies, a devious smile on her face.

Sure. Maybe it will be. But then Karolina thinks back to their last conversation and how abruptly it had ended when she brought up what Chase had told her about he and Nico’s parents.
“Honestly, my mom is more annoyed by it than I am. Something about how it’ll be distracting,” she answers, shrugging.

“No, I think you’ll probably both just avoid each other and Nico will sneak into someone else’s room until midnight.”

“Didn’t she always have that weird on and off thing with Wilder?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Alex Wilder was another singles skater who trained up in Michigan. But he’d also grown up competing at many of the same competitions as Karolina and Nico.

Which inevitably led to Karolina walking into a single-stall bathroom in San Jose last year and finding Alex and Nico wrapped around each other. (She still remembers the look on Nico's shocked face, her kiss-swollen lips and flushed cheeks. It's weird, and she doesn't know why it still crosses her mind every now and then when she sees Nico.)

The sound of Gert’s voice gets Karolina out of her own head.

“But she seems a lot more focused now, you know? Who knows. Your mom might turn her into you.”

Karolina frowns. She knows that Nico is technically the most consistent ladies skater the United States has to offer. She's heard the rumblings about she's working on a triple axel. And Karolina also knows that her strength comes mostly from her artistry. Her mother is no doubt trying to get Nico to that same level of artistry. She’s seen her coach Nico.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nico has always been the more rebellious type. You, Karolina Dean, are not. Leslie’s probably keeping her on a pretty tight leash to keep her head in the game.”

Karolina just decides to change the subject, rather than focusing on Gert’s implications of how uptight Karolina is.

“So what do you think she’s doing over there with Chase?”

That gets Gert’s attention again immediately, causing the purple-haired girl to look up quickly.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Chase!” Molly confirms, oblivious to her sister’s reaction.

“I wonder what they’re talking about,” Karolina says.

Gert seems to notice Karolina zero in on her and how suddenly she perked up at the sound of Chase’s name.

“I mean, they did spend a lot of time together when both of them were still coached by Janet,” Gert answers coolly. “Probably just catching up.”

“I guess I just never imagined those two as friends,” Karolina adds, partially because it’s true, and mostly to see Gert’s reaction.

“What are you, jealous?”

“What? Jealous?” Karolina scoffs, maybe a bit too dramatically- but then again she is Karolina
Dean. She literally gets praise for how dramatic she is on the ice. The blonde takes a sip of her coffee and looks at Gert. “No. I don’t even know what you think I’d be jealous of.”

“Alright, alright,” Gert replies before turning her attention away from her. She’s got the end of her pencil against her paper and begins erasing with a passion. Karolina and Molly share a look, noticing that Gert isn’t really even looking at the paper as she rids it of marks.

Karolina raises an eyebrow. “What’s your deal?”

Finally Gert returns her gaze to her notebook before mumbling, “Nothing. Just this math homework.”

//

Karolina lets out an almost inaudible groan. Dinner had been going so well, and then of course the conversation had shifted back to Gibborum and her training and Cup of China. Couldn’t they make it through one meal talking about something else?

Leslie picks up her wine glass, the pink liquid swirling against the glass as the woman gestures as she speaks. “I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t want me to ask someone to switch rooms with you, Karolina.”

Karolina balls up her napkin against her lap beneath the table. “Because that’s weird, Mom,” she can’t help but laugh thinking about how absurd it would be to have her mother call and request a room change for her. “I’m not going to spend a lot of time at the hotel anyway. But it looks suspicious and gives people reason to talk for no reason.”

“She’s a distraction—” Leslie begins before Karolina interjects.

“Why do you keep saying that? We barely speak to each other. We’ve made it so far without her causing my career to go down the drain. Why is it such a big deal to you?”

“I just think she’ll be a bad influence on you, Karolina. Or she’ll keep you up too late because she’ll play her music too loud or be up talking with other people in your room or something.”

Karolina wishes her mom would just say what she means by all that. Nico is a factor in Karolina’s skating that Leslie cannot control, and so of course now she needs to fix it. The blonde turns to her dad, the tired, begging look in her eyes apparently sending him the message that she needs him to back her up.

Frank clears his throat. “Leslie, I think Karolina can handle herself. She’s 18 and has been doing the international circuit for years now.”

“Exactly. I’ll be fine,” Karolina chimes in. “I don’t even really see why you’re so upset. Nico’s one of your skaters now.”

Leslie dabs her napkin against the corner of her mouth, but her expression remains the same serious, tense look of disapproval despite Karolina and Frank’s attempts. “She will be as long as she proves herself useful.”

Karolina pauses for a moment. *What does that even mean?* Probably something about maintaining
her image as the perfect skater, perfect coach, perfect mom—perfect, perfect, perfect. She has to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Starting something more will only make her mom more determined to have her way.

So instead, she takes a breath and puts on a smile, forcing her tone into one that’s calm and light. “Mom, come on. It will just create controversy and drama if I change rooms now. It won’t even be a big deal.”

Leslie takes a sharp breath in, her fingers going to the bridge of her nose like Karolina’s words have just given her a migraine. Finally the redhead looks back at her daughter. “Alright fine. Have it your way. But if it impacts your performance it will reflect poorly back on you.”

See, Gert's wrong about her. Karolina can have her own version of rebellion. And maybe this will keep her off her back about Nico. Maybe, because of their mutual friendship with Gert, they'll be forced to be friends now too.

With how strange things have gotten at Gibborim over the past few weeks, Karolina thinks it's not out of the realm of possibility.
They’re approaching the front doors of the hotel when Molly turns to Nico and whispers, “Promise me you’ll try and play nice with Karolina while my sister isn’t around, okay?”

Chase overhears her and sighs.

“Yeah, pretty shitty that Leslie wouldn’t let her off for a few days to come with us.”

Nico doesn’t miss the look of disappointment on Chase’s face and fights back a smile. Interesting.

“Pretty shitty seems to be Leslie’s general attitude anyway,” she answers.

Molly rolls her eyes and argues, “She just wants to make us better.”

“She has an incredibly interesting way of showing it sometimes,” Nico mumbles.

Nico finds Chase smirking at her comment and bumps his shoulder. The smirk fades, and he gives her a pointed look.

“But back to what Molly said. Please be nice.”

Nico groans, bothered that the two are even focusing on this.

“Leslie literally doesn’t want me talking to Karolina anyway, so that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Not sure Gert will think that just ignoring each other for over a week is beneficial to either of you,” Molly offers.

Nico doesn’t really give a fuck what Gert thinks right now. She’s jet-lagged and all she wants is a bed.

“Gert is not my mother. This isn’t even important right now. What’s more pressing is making sure that Molly is prepared for her first international competition.”

She pats Molly on the back, earning a smile from the somehow still excited young girl. Molly and Chase had moved up to the senior level in ice dance last season, staying within the States, but a bronze at Nationals had earned them the opportunity to start competing on the Grand Prix circuit this season.

They made their way to the front desk in the lobby, Nico putting on her best fake smile as the employee at the desk asked how they could help her.


The employee hands her a key card, and Chase and Molly trail not too far behind her. They all board the elevator and head up to the second floor with their bags in tow. The three head their separate ways with a promise to meet up later when the elevator opens. Nico lets out a heavy sigh as she pulls out her key card and enters, bracing herself in the event that her roommate has already arrived.
She enters quietly, scanning the bathroom and the closet and the nice enough room with two full beds and a modern décor. Nothing is disturbed yet. She must have beaten Karolina here. Nico lets out a sigh of relief as she lays her eyes on the two beds and flings herself onto the one closest to the window, ready to doze off already.

She stuffs her face in a pillow and groans loudly when she hears a knock on the door ten minutes later.

She relaxes again when she sees that it’s just Chase.

“Enjoying the peace and quiet?” he asks as he steps past her into the room.

“Where’s Molly?”

Chase shrugs and flops down on one of the beds.

“Ran into some other skating friends.”

She nods and half-jokingly replies, “So you’re letting an unaccompanied minor run around in a foreign country?”

Chase’s eyes shoot wide open when she says that.

“Well when you say it like that…”

Nico throws a pillow at him and sits down beside him.

“Just don’t tell Gert,” he mumbles from behind the pillow.

She smiles and answers, “I won’t, but if anything happens to her, we’re dead.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, Nico taking the time to connect her phone to the hotel wi-fi and see what she’s missed on social media during their 13 hour flight. A few minutes pass, and Chase props himself up on his elbows and turns to her.

“Can you believe we’re here?”

“Well, technically I’m here because of Eiffel’s ankle injury,” she quips, scanning her Instagram feed.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

Nico looks away from her phone and meets his gaze, just to indulge him. She knew he’d get like this at some point – all nostalgic and sappy. Chase has always been a softie underneath all that muscle and broody, perpetually furrowed brow.

“No, Stein. I really have no idea what you mean.”

He grins and takes her response as a cue to continue.

“We’re somehow skating at the same rink again, and now we’re both at an international competition. And during an Olympic year, Nico. It’s crazy.”

“Wow, did NBC start already with the dramatic commercials, or are you always this emotional?”

She always deflects him with sarcasm, but Nico has to admit it’s sweet (even though she’d never tell him that out loud). She kind of likes knowing that at least someone at Gibborim has her back.
“Shut up. You have to admit it’s kind of nice to be around each other again.”

He sits up and wraps an arm around her shoulder, and Nico leans into her friend.

“I’m sorry we lost touch,” she says after a minute, barely above a whisper.

He squeezes her tighter.

“I kind of lost touch with everyone I knew after—”

Chase cuts her off immediately.

“Hey, you don’t have to explain yourself to me. Losing Amy was hard on all of us at the rink. I can’t imagine what the past few years have been like for you. And now this bullshit with our parents, too.”

She gives Chase a soft smile as if to say thank you for not making me talk about Amy. He’s one of the few she’s willing to do so with, but still. Maybe not while jet-lagged and preparing for an international competition.

So instead she just laughs and says, “Pretty fucked up, isn’t it?”

He smiles and nods.

“Pretty fucked up. But we’re good, right?”

“We’re good. And it’s nice to know I have a friend around here.”

“Let go of years-long grudges, and you might make more!”

She rolls her eyes and grabs another pillow to throw at him.

One reconciliation was enough for now.

//

Karolina has been here for hours already.

Rather than going straight to the hotel, her mother had insisted that they check out the rink before they do anything else.

Everyone’s flying in around this time, so there will be no one around. It’ll be great.

It was not great.

She was exhausted, and when some of the employees had offered to let Karolina get on the ice for a bit with some of the more local competitors, Leslie’s eyes had lit up like a light show at the Sochi Opening Ceremonies.

Karolina knew Nico was probably already in the room and groaned when she’d grabbed her key card, the employee at the desk confirming that her roommate was already here. She parts ways with Leslie as she heads out to check on some of her other students. Karolina heads to room 202.

She presses into the door, awkwardly maneuvering her bags through the doorway. Nico lays on the
bed further from the door, eyes closed and earbuds in.

The sound of the door slamming shut quickly behind Karolina causes Nico’s eyes to open, and she curses inwardly, wishing she would have caught the door sooner and not have disturbed Nico.

“Hey,” Karolina offers as Nico removes one earbud and acknowledges her presence.

“Hey. Wasn’t sure you were gonna show up.”

Karolina just smirks in response, because even though Nico’s comments are usually meant to cut a little, there’s a lightness to this that she rarely sees.

It’s almost pleasant.

“Well, you’ve gotten to know my mother well enough lately to know that she had to go check out the rink first instead of go to sleep like a normal person, so naturally, I had to go with her.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Your mother is a lovely, calm woman,” Nico deadpans.

Karolina has to fight back a laugh. She’s never really been able to do this before, bond with someone over mutual frustration with a coach. Mostly because her mother has always been her coach, and no one except Nico has ever been brave enough to do it anyway.

Karolina keeps playing along with the banter.

“Please. Gert told me about how you’ve been hiding from her in the Zamboni in the mornings.”

Nico types away on her phone, looking away from Karolina.

“I have no comment.”

Karolina wonders if she’s losing Nico’s interest already, that this is the only decent conversation they’ll have for another several weeks. She doesn’t know why, but she doesn’t want it to stop. It’s fun. Bantering Nico is fun.

“What, do you think I’m going to go running back to her and tattle if you say something about her? I know how hard she is on her skaters. I’m no exception. She’s crazy sometimes.”

Nico peers up at Karolina at that, an eyebrow quirked up, as if surprised that the blonde is so willing to throw her mother under the bus like this. Nico scans Karolina up and down before replying, noticing the hands planted firmly on her hips. Karolina finds it unsettling.

“Wow, the lack of sleep makes you feistier than I remember,” Nico retorts.

Karolina shrinks back down after that, as if remembering fully who she’s talking to. Gert had probably told Nico to be nicer to Karolina to appease her. It was nothing. They’d go back to ignoring each other in five minutes.

“Yeah, I guess. I’m sorry,” Karolina mumbles, tossing a duffle bag onto the bed and rummaging through it.

“No, it’s fine. Banter is better than awkward silence, right?”

It’s awkward still, but surprisingly Nico seems to have less animosity than she usually does at competitions around Karolina. But again, they have mutual friends now. They see each other every day. Their attitude toward each other has to change, at least a little bit.
“Well, the awkward silence would be filled by Gert’s constant messages reminding me to try to be civil and interact with you,” Karolina replies.

Nico snorts and answers, “You say the sweetest things to me, Dean.”

Karolina drops the shirt she’d picked up out of the bag. That was…forward. But she didn’t mean anything by that, right? Nothing weird. Stop making it weird, Karolina. It’s a joke.

It’s weird, the joking flirty tone in Nico’s voice. But Karolina doesn’t hate it. She has no idea what that means. It must just be the excitement of the two of them actually having a civil conversation.

“Calm down,” Nico finally answers, probably noticing the shift. “Chase was doing the same thing to me earlier.”

“Chase was here?” Karolina asks, only as a way to change the subject.

“Yeah, why? Need to get some pre-practice flirting in?”

Karolina narrows her eyes at that, but Nico doesn’t see her, too focused on whatever game she’s messing around on. Did Nico really think that she and Chase were a thing? He’d made that comment a few weeks ago about her being pretty, but… no. It’s not like that.

“So you two seem pretty close,” Karolina comments after realizing she’s probably gone silent for too long.

“We skated together when we were younger. Lost touch after my sister died, and he moved out to LA.”

Karolina pretends to be looking around for things in her makeup bag, her heart clenching a bit when Nico mentions her sister, surprised that she brought that up so nonchalantly.

Karolina doesn’t know what else to say, so she tries to just let Nico know that she’s listening.

“I remember hearing about that. Amy, right?”

She watches as Nico shifts uncomfortably on the bed, still not looking at Karolina.

“Yeah. And then that wasn’t enough of a tragic backstory, so we had to throw in the cheating father too. But you already knew about that.”

And there it is. Just like that, the mood has changed again, back to the stiff, sputtering conversation that Karolina is used to with Nico. She drops the tube of mascara she’s been fidgeting with and stands tall, turning toward Nico.

“Look, I’m sorry for saying anything, but don’t take it out on Chase. It affects him too.”

“I know that,” Nico grits out, eyes ever focused on the small screen in front of her. “Chase and I are fine, and our friendship really isn’t your business.”

This is the Nico she gets most of the time. Karolina will make what she thinks is a kind comment, and Nico will shoot back by saying how Karolina doesn’t know her. It’s been a pattern they’ve danced since they’ve met, with the occasionally kind conversation.

And now that Karolina knows for a fact that Nico can be nice, she’s over the brooding front.

“Hey, sorry, I wasn’t trying to pry.”
Nico forcefully places her phone on the bed next to her, like she’s trying to make it clear to Karolina that now she’s really got her attention.

“Then don’t waltz in here and give me advice like you know me!”

“I do know you,” Karolina responds almost automatically.

And she does. She’s known Nico since they were kids. She knows her annoying defense mechanisms that have kept Karolina at further than arm’s length. She knows about Amy. She knows about her parents. She knows she won’t let herself connect to the music she skates to, even if she doesn’t quite know why. But Karolina knows Nico Minoru better than she thinks. She’s not as complicated as she makes herself out to be.

But Nico disagrees. She grabs her phone again and vaults herself off the bed, suddenly invading Karolina’s space. She’s a good head shorter than Karolina, but she leans in and stares into her with angry eyes.

“You don’t know a damn thing about me, Karolina Dean,” Nico whispers.

Normally she’d back down, but Karolina is frustrated and tired and so over Nico’s bullshit (not to mention that her heart is beating rapidly now that she’s standing this close to her).

“Only because you never let me.”

It’s so quick, but Karolina sees it—the flash of confusion in Nico’s eyes, the vulnerability. Like she’s never even imagined that their “rivalry” over the years could be hurting Karolina. That maybe, deep down, Karolina has wanted them to get along long before Gert tried to encourage it.

Another wave of exhaustion hits Karolina, and she finally decides to give in. It’s getting late, anyway.

“Whatever. You’re right. I’m probably just tired. I’m going to sleep. We have practice early tomorrow.”

They wordlessly toe around each other for the next hour, taking turns in the bathroom and arranging clothing without so much as a glance at each other. The only thing said between them the rest of the night is when Karolina asks if it’s okay to turn off the light. (Nico says yes.)

They go through the same routine early the next morning, their alarms going off at about the same time, most likely because Leslie had sent a group text to be at the rink at 7am.

Karolina zones out watching Chase and Molly run through parts of their short dance, trying to get the transitions smoother and the twizzles tighter. After a while, Leslie has them drilling one of their lifts when the duo finally hits it in a way that pleases her.

“Lovely,” Leslie calls out. “We’ll work on that lift some more in a bit. Take a break.”

Molly heads toward the exit and puts on her guards, stepping off the ice, while Chase slides to a stop at the boards next to Karolina.

“How’s the roommate situation going?”

“Well, we had our longest conversation in the seven years that we’ve known each other.”

Chase flashes a giant grin, looking like he can’t wait to update Gert on the progress that Karolina and
Nico must be making.

“That’s great! See, no one can resist that Karolina Dean charm.”

“It ended in us fighting.”

The grin is gone, and now Chase just looks confused.

“What?”

Karolina knows she needs to be on the ice, so she decides to leave poor Chase guessing for awhile while she practices.

“I have to warm up now. Bye!”

Chase calls after her, but he’s too late. Karolina has flung herself onto the ice, quickly picking up more and more speed as she warms up. Chase is shooed off the ice by Leslie as Nico and a few other skaters come on.

Karolina minds her own business for the first bit, mostly working on turns and a few spins in the center of the rink before whirling into a triple flip. She lands cleanly, like its second nature, and she keeps her eyes on the others to make sure she has a clear path into her next jump. She hops up into a triple lutz, again coming down cleanly.

She feels good, and with the beginning of the Grand Prix season coming up in just a few days now, Karolina can’t ask for more. She’s focused. She’s ready to claim an Olympic spot.

And then she happens to catch Nico out of the corner of her eye. The girl is gliding along, picking up speed as she goes. Karolina watches in awe as Nico takes off forward, and… no.

There’s no way.

Nico gets a huge jump and makes a full three and a half revolutions, coming back down as if it were nothing special.

She had a triple axel. Nico had a triple axel. And her mother hadn’t even bothered to warn her.

Awesome.

Karolina hears a few gasps and sees a few people clapping (Leslie included). Karolina whips back around to see Nico smirking at her as she flies off into her next jump.

It’s beautiful. Textbook, really. But Karolina can’t help the knots in stomach because she knows if Nico can land that consistently, along with the rest of her programs, Karolina may be fighting for second at Nationals.

She loses her focus and skates around aimlessly for a minute until Karolina hears her name on the lips of her mother.

“Karolina, let’s go. You can watch everyone else’s programs during the competition.”
Nico is seething.

She’s sitting in fourth after the short program, with Karolina in first. But Karolina knows that Nico would be in first if not for her botched triple axel, which she popped and only landed a single.

Which is why Nico is eerily quiet (more so than usual) as she stuffs her skates into her bag while the rest of the competitors mill about the locker room.

Karolina knows the disappointment of missing a jump you’ve drilled over and over. But competition is different. International competition? Even more.

Karolina also can’t ignore the relief she feels right now. Only five points separate her and Nico, and there’s plenty of room for Nico to make that up. But Karolina is sitting on top for the time being.

Later that night, when they return to the hotel, Nico storms into the room with Karolina hot on her heels.

“Nico, hey.”

Nico lets her bags fall to the ground with a dramatic shove, ignoring Karolina as she makes to remove her jacket and toss that as well.

“Nico.”

Nico continues to ignore her and grabs her laptop, probably to Netflix binge in silence like they have been for the duration of their stay thus far.

“Nico, are you—”

The smaller girl whirls around as Karolina reaches out to get her attention.

“Would you please just leave me alone?” she snaps.

Karolina flinches. She regrets even trying to talk to Nico, and she doesn’t even really know why. She’s always been the comforter in her friend group, at the rink. She usually takes it upon herself to give encouragement after a bad skate. Nico clearly doesn’t want to hear it.

“I’m sorry. I was just trying to—”

“Trying to what? Befriend me and pretend we haven’t ignored each other for years and then have this heart-to-heart like they do in the fucking movies?”

“No, I just—”

“Just because your life gets to look like a movie with your literal movie star father and national champion mother doesn’t mean that everyone else’s gets to.”

She wishes she never would have said anything. She wishes Nico would just stop because this can only get worse.

Trying to diffuse the situation, Karolina just replies, “Hey now, there’s no need to make it personal.”

Nico scoffs, and Karolina realizes quickly that clearly that wasn’t the correct response.

“Really? There’s no need to make this personal.”
Karolina can see the gears turning in Nico’s head, clearly not done talking yet. They’ve probably been building to some sort of verbal showdown like this since they’ve met. All she can think to do now is just let Nico have her moment and hope they’re both still standing when the dust settles.

“I have had to watch you be USFS’s sweetheart since we were 11 years old. They’ve been grooming you to grow up to be exactly what you’ve become since we were kids, and I have had to bust my ass since I was four years old, when my mother decided to throw a pair of skates on me. And the entire time, you’ve just gotten to focus solely on skating because that’s all your family’s life revolves around. I didn’t have that. None of us had that. You had everything handed to you and—”

(Karolina can take everything else she’s said. But she can’t let that go unchallenged.)

“I have not had everything handed to me.”

“Well, you really could have fooled me, Karolina.”

It’s then that Karolina realizes that being in proximity with someone for seven years doesn’t necessarily mean you know them. Maybe they don’t know each other at all.

“My family looks perfect on paper, doesn’t it? I’m the only child of Frank and Leslie Dean, two exceptionally successful people. To hear that medaling at Nationals this year would be the bare minimum of what’s expected? Do you have any idea how much pressure I am under?”

Nico refuses to meet Karolina’s gaze and she sits down on her bed, and Karolina prays that she’s not coming off as insensitive. She doesn’t mean to diminish Nico’s pain because Karolina knows there’s a lot of it, and with good reason.

But Karolina has also just recently realized that her relationship with her mother is probably extremely unhealthy, and she’s so mad at Nico and the way she’s been acting that she can’t help but let it show.

She never gets to do this. Never really gets to vent to anyone because at the end of the day, everyone worships the ground that Leslie walks on, regardless of how manipulative she is.

“We definitely don’t have the same struggles, but it doesn’t mean that they’re not there. You have to deal with my mom for a few hours every day. I have to go home with her. And my dad sees how downright ugly she gets with me sometimes and just sits there. And I don’t do anything about it because I never thought anything she was saying was wrong. Because she’s my mother. I should be able to trust her, right? And then you get to an age when you start to realize that maybe parents aren’t always the perfect example that you’ve made them out to be. That their parenting methods are actually just gaslighting you into submission. Everybody thinks I’m this perfect, well-behaved child who’s so happy to be the face of Gibborim, completely innocent and pure. It’s because I was scared into being anything else. Every time I’d get a little frustrated while practicing, she’d just tell me how grateful I should be that I had a mother who wanted to spend so much time with me, that she had sacrificed so much for me, and I have no idea how hard it is to be a parent, especially when I’m so ungrateful.”

Karolina’s voice cracks, and she begs her eyes to hold back the tears that are threatening to fall. Nico still refuses to look at her.

“I guess what I’m saying is that I know that this is about a lot more than a failed triple axel. And I’m not sure we can keep going like this not having some better understanding of each other.”

Nico finally meets Karolina’s eyes, her jaw clenched tight and her eyes blank to not even give the
slightest hint to Karolina at what she’s feeling.

Karolina is laying it all out here, and all she can do is hope that Nico is taking it to heart. So she keeps going.

“And you do work your ass off, Nico. To even be confident enough in a triple axel to put it in a program is more than what almost any other female skater is doing right now. That’s something to be proud of. And I know you can land it too. And especially having just moved across the country and —”

“Karolina.”

She’s not sure she hears her correctly at first, that Nico has actually acknowledged her. But Karolina pauses anyway and waits.

“Yes?”

And with that, the façade falls. Nico’s eyes soften, and she smiles—probably the most genuine smile she’s ever seen out of Nico Minoru.

“I had no idea you talked so much.”

And Karolina lets out a relieved laugh, perching herself on the edge of the other bed so she faces Nico.

“Look, I’m sorry. And I’ll shut up now, but you should know that I have a lot of respect for you as an athlete. And as a person.”

Nico nods solemnly and looks away from Karolina as if she just realized something important.

“I’m sorry.”

“I accept your—”

“No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t even be having this conversation with you.”

Karolina is frustrated now, assuming that Nico is falling back into their old habits of being cold with each other.

“What are you talking about?”

“Your mother has told me to stay away from you because apparently I’m a distraction.”

Karolina’s stomach twists, and the uncomfortable and sickening feeling that comes with it comes on so quickly, she nearly doubles over. Why would her mother do that? Karolina knew that she would prefer that she wasn’t around Nico, but to go so far as to tell Nico to stay away from her?

“Oh.”

Nico shrugs and replies, “I kind of assumed you were in on it. But judging by what you said, you didn’t know.”

“I had no idea.”

“I’m sorry, I—”
“No, it’s okay. Now we’re even, right? We both know about your cheating dad and my mom being a conniving bitch.”

The shock on Nico’s face when Karolina says that is enough to bring the slightest bit of relief. But she’s still angry. She’s so angry. Controlling everything about her skating was one thing, and something that Karolina had almost resigned herself to over the years. Controlling everything about her interactions with other people, regardless of who they were, was another thing entirely.

“Wow.”

“You know, she also desperately wanted me to swap rooms with someone.”

“I figured that would happen as soon as I read the email.”

“Maybe she thought this would happen, and we’d both end up realizing she’s an extremely good coach but a terrible person.”

Nico snorts and shakes her head fervently.

“No.”

“You don’t think so?” Karolina asks.

“I certainly didn’t see myself saying more than two words to you each day we were here. I don’t think your mother did either.”

Karolina nods and can’t help but smile, despite the simmering dread of the continuous deterioration of her trust in her mother. Now she might just have to become friends with Nico to spite her mother.

“Well, it wasn’t the worst thing in the world, was it?”

“Your conversational grade of execution is surprisingly high,” Nico quips.


Karolina giggles and watches Nico fight a smile at the blonde’s response to her joke. She stops, and the two just stare for a moment, letting out deep breaths they both seemed to not know they were holding.

Nico gives her one last small smile before standing.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but the muscle soreness is setting in for me, so I need to get some sleep.”

Karolina nods as Nico grabs some clothes and heads to the bathroom to change. The achy feeling in her stomach has been replaced with something lighter, something she’s only felt a few times in the past interacting with friends. It’s nice, and she’s always just assumed it’s because she’s excited about the budding friendships she’s made.

Karolina can’t help but fall asleep with a smile on her face at the thought of moving toward friendship with Nico.

Chapter End Notes
smash that motherfucking kudos button if you know the feeling i’m talking about at the end of the chapter when you really "want to be a girl's friend" but in reality you just want to kiss her face. poor karolina about to get hit so hard with her gay self.
Chapter Notes

yo who knew trying to write a fic while in grad school would be difficult lmao sorry about the accidental hiatus fam!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Karolina sits hunched over in the bleachers as she watches one of the warm-up groups for the men’s free skate. Chase sits between Karolina and Nico—the two had ended their conversation last night on a more positive note than it had begun, but today has been a struggle getting Nico to say anything to her. On top of that, Karolina is still reeling from Nico slipping up on the fact that her mother is trying to control her interactions with other skaters.

Karolina has barely spoken to anyone all day and blames it on a mix of being tired and wanting to focus on her own skating.

“How do you think Alex is going to do?” Molly suddenly asks from beside her, watching the young man go through his warm up.

Karolina just shrugs and internally rolls her eyes at the mention of Alex Wilder. She knows that she should be cheering for him, but she’s always been fairly indifferent toward him, seeing him at competitions in the past (and in the San Jose rink bathroom with Nico).

It makes her angry—how easily Alex seems to connect with Nico. Nobody else in their group is all that close to Alex at all, except for Nico. Nico has been so unpleasant the majority of the time they’ve known each other that it’s odd to see her be close with someone else. She’s seen it with Alex and now with Chase, and that was probably because of how they’d grown up together. What does he have that she…they don’t.

Karolina gets even angrier as the thoughts come tumbling into her head the way they do… that’s not how she means it at all. She doesn’t even really like Nico still (or, that’s what she tells herself), with how hot and cold she’s been. She just wants to know why she’d rather hang around Alex when Karolina and the Gibborum group have done nothing but try to be nice to her. It’s infuriating, really. She thought she was getting somewhere with her after last night, and now she’s barely looked at her all—

“How do you think Alex is going to do?”

It’s Chase talking to her this time, about…she doesn’t even know what because she’s completely spaced out. The men are filing off the ice now, ready to continue with the competition, and Chase repeats his question.

“You think he stands a chance against some of the international skaters?”

Karolina opens her mouth to speak, making the mistake of turning toward Chase but letting her eyes wander past him and onto Nico.

“Don’t you think you guys are being a little hard on him?” Nico interjects.
The rest of the group all give her the same confused looks.

“You don’t have to defend him just because you’ve slept with him, Nico,” Chase answers, and Karolina wonders how Chase is still alive after making that comment.

Nico rolls her eyes.

“Fuck off, Stein.”

Chase only smirks and offers Nico his contraband M&M’s that he somehow got past Leslie, which she happily takes.

Karolina is fascinated by their dynamic.

She’d never tell him, but she wants to know how Chase got there with Nico.

“For the record, I never slept with him,” Nico adds, and Karolina feels the weirdest, unexpected sense of relief at Nico’s words.

She blames it on the lack of sleep and utter confusion she’s in about where her budding friendship with Nico stands. She’s just getting on her good side. Maybe she just doesn’t feel like sharing Nico with someone she barely knows in Alex.

(Alex ends up a respectable sixth, which is honestly better than Karolina expected of him.)

The men’s competition finishes around 12:30pm (around 9:30pm in LA as Molly reminds them all, to their dismay), and Leslie ushers her students to the ice for practice. Nico is still silent as they head to the locker room to change, and Karolina just can’t help herself as they’re on their way back out.

“Hey,” she calls out to Nico, causing her to stop just inside the doorway as others pass them, Molly giving them both an odd look as she passes by.

“Yes?” Nico responds, looking mostly confused and annoyed.

“Are we…okay?” Karolina asks, shifting awkwardly back and forth on her skates.

“What do you mean?”

Nico looks confused and anxious to get out as they partially block the exit to the locker room, receiving some looks from other skaters as they walk by. This is stupid, and Karolina is this close to making a split decision to tell her “good luck” or something, but she also knows that Nico is way too perceptive to believe that’s why she stopped her.

Plus, Karolina’s never considered herself very good at lying.

“Well, I just…things got a little tense last night, and then I thought we were good, but then today you’ve been kind of quiet, and—”

“Oh my god, you really do talk a lot, don’t you, Dean?”

Nico’s face is softer now, lighter, and it makes her lose all focus as another skater accidentally bumps into Karolina on her way out.

Still, she’s slightly embarrassed by Nico’s response and knows she’s failing to fight the blush on her cheeks.
“I’m really sorry,” Karolina mumbles. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

It’s awkward now, and Karolina just wants to bolt and go skate and hope that somewhere in the chaos, Nico will forget that this pathetic interaction ever happened.

Instead, she can’t help more words from tumbling out.

“I just thought maybe we were…starting to get over our original impressions of each other.”

She’s usually so withholding with Nico—cordial, but not over the top. And apparently the past few days have completely ruined the stoic façade she’s been cultivating with Nico over the past seven years. Nico laughs, and Karolina’s stomach churns.

“What?” Karolina asks, almost afraid to hear what Nico has to say.

“I see. You’re going to be one of those kinds of friends.”

Oh.

(She won’t ever admit it to herself or anyone else, but Karolina’s heart skips a beat knowing that Nico just used the word “friend” to describe their relationship.)

“Huh?” she manages to get out.

“The kind who needs constant validation that we are indeed, friends.”

“Friends?”

Karolina knows she sounds like a bumbling idiot, but she’s somewhere between utter disbelief and joy that Nico apparently considers them friends now.

“Sure. Or at the very least, we have to pretend just to piss your mom off.”

Oh.

Nico smirks, and Karolina has to clench every muscle in her jaw to hide her disappointment.

She gives a hollow laugh, hoping that it’s just enough to hide.

“Yeah, of course. That’s a great idea.”

“Better get out there then, bud.”

There’s more sarcasm in Nico’s voice than Karolina would like as the shorter girl turns on her heel to make her way out of the locker room. Karolina follows her and sees her mother eyeing both of them.

Karolina steels herself, clearing her throat to grab Nico’s attention again and whispering, “Well, in that case, we better keep talking because I see a certain coach of ours looking quite annoyed with us right now.”

“Lovely.”

They walk the short distance from the locker room to the rink side by side, Leslie’s watchful eye giving them both a disapproving look as they walk by. Nico gives Karolina an amused smile as she takes off her guards and steps onto the ice.
And maybe, Karolina thinks, this will be enough for now.

She puts her heart and soul into perfecting every little bit of her free skate that Leslie comes down hard on. Karolina feels strong, and she swears she sees Nico watching intently out of the corner of her eye.

Later in the afternoon, Karolina is back in her and Nico’s room by herself, trying to keep herself preoccupied and not thinking about how Nico might be hanging out with Alex Wilder.

A knock on the door stuns her out of her brooding, and she goes to see Molly on the other side of the door.

“Molly, hi!”

Molly, young and curious as ever, wastes no time with greetings.

“What were you and Nico talking about earlier?”

Karolina frowns and changes the subject, knowing Molly has to be at the rink again soon for the short dance.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

Molly shrugs.

“I am, and I know I’ll get too anxious if I think about it too much for the next hour. So tell me what was up with you and Nico? I thought you two hated each other.”

“We don’t hate each other,” Karolina responds automatically.

Molly brushes past her into the room, and seeing that Nico isn’t there, gives Karolina a look.

“We’ve kind of, I don’t know, bonded? Just really hashing things out and trying to start over, I guess.”

Molly has apparently perfected the steely look that Gert gives when she’s trying to get something out of someone as the girl only looks at her harder.

Karolina can only sigh, and, knowing that Molly means well, sits down on her bed and explains.

“She also let slip that my mom told Nico not to talk to me, so now I’m pretty sure she’s just talking to me to help me piss her off.”

“Is that really a good idea this time of year?”

It hurts a little to see how trusting of Leslie the girl is, knowing that her mother, like with all of her skaters, has taken advantage of Molly’s young age and her searching for a mentor in her life. Karolina doesn’t want to hurt Molly, but she’s more worried about Leslie doing even worse.

“Look, I’m tired of her controlling every aspect of my life. I deserve a little space to do what I want.”

Molly cocks her head and replies, “Wow, Nico’s really gotten you to loosen up all of a sudden.”

Karolina rolls her eyes and tries to pick her next words carefully.

“Oh, stop. It’s—”
She’s interrupted by another knock at the door. Karolina is about to get up to answer, but Molly is already up and opening the door.

“Hi, Molly.”

Karolina can hear her mother’s surprised voice as she appears in the door behind Molly.

“Shouldn’t you and Chase be getting ready to head over to the rink?”

“Yes, coach,” Molly answers. “I was just leaving. Just wanted some last-minute advice from someone who’s been at this level of competition before.”

Molly smiles at Karolina as she says it, and Leslie looks at her daughter proudly.

“Good idea, Molly. I’m glad that you see Karolina as a positive role model.”

“She’s the best!” Molly replies, as if Karolina hadn’t just been explaining her frustrations with the woman before them thirty seconds ago. (She owes Molly, she thinks.)

“Well, time for you to go find Chase and get ready. I’ll join you in the lobby shortly.”

Molly nods, smiles and waves at Karolina, and makes her way out.

“Hi, mom.”

Leslie steps into the room with authority, and Karolina can already tell that she’s not here for friendly small talk.

“Karolina, dear. I wanted to discuss something with you before I left. You and Nico seemed awfully close today.”

Of course.

“Mom, it’s not that—”

Leslie cuts her off.

“I thought I told you no distractions.”

And oh, god forbid that any other skaters be sources of support and not distractions.

“You don’t see Chase and Molly as distractions,” she challenges.

Leslie narrows her eyes at Karolina, clearly not used to and not enjoying how her daughter is testing her.

“And they’re not your direct competition, sweetheart,” she responds. “I’m just telling you to be careful who you trust.”

“And I’m just trying to get through being her roommate without any drama, and for me, that means being kind.”

Karolina sits back down on the bed, and Leslie remains standing. Karolina wants to roll her eyes because she knows her mother well—she knows this is just a power move.

“You always were an idealist.”
“What is that supposed to mean?”

Leslie scoffs at her, as if it’s obvious.

“You really think someone with a background of being surrounded by betrayal is actually interested in getting to know you? She’s trying to get in your head.”

She snaps. As frustrated as she is with Nico right now, Karolina is even more upset with her mother. Skating isn’t famous for its objectivity, but Karolina never enjoys hearing her mother’s unedited opinions of some of her other skaters.

“Mom, I don’t really think it’s professional to be discussing your personal opinions about your other students with me.”

Leslie rolls her eyes in a way that Karolina only sees when her mother seems utterly exhausted by the fact that someone could have an opinion different than hers.

“Since when do you mind?”

“Since I’m not the only ladies’ singles skater at Gibborim currently on the Olympic contenders short list,” she answers sharply.

Leslie’s voice gets louder now.

“Oh good, you do still have the Olympics on your mind. It was getting difficult to tell with how interested you seem in creating a friendlier environment between everyone.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Mom—”

Karolina blurts it out without thinking—18 years of walking on eggshells completely gone out the window with her frustration. She’s never cursed in front of her mother.

Leslie remains expressionless, her gaze shooting deep in Karolina. And then, in the coldest, quietest voice, “What did you just say to me?”

“I’m sorry,” Karolina mumbles out of reflex.

“What was that?”

“I said, I’m sorry, Coach,” she answers again, with more conviction. “It’s just, I’m sitting in first place right now. I don’t know what else you want from me.”

She knows it’s a lousy excuse. It’s true, sometimes she doesn’t know what her mother wants from her. But mostly, Karolina just wants Leslie to give her the same generic speech she always does so she can get out.

“Karolina, you’re in first by less than two points. And Nico is only five points behind you. I shouldn’t have to tell you what else I want. You should know.”

And Karolina does know. They’ve been over this dozens of times. There are higher component scores to get, better GOE’s, but even coming off a silver at Junior Worlds last season, competing in an Olympic year doesn’t come without stress.

Karolina tries to reason with her, and there’s so much more she wants to say—how she can’t stand being treated like the 11-year-old scared into skating better with the threats of having things taken away, or the 15-year-old who had to ignore choreographers brushing up against her as they took an
entirely too “hands-on” approach to teaching her while her mom looked the other way. Karolina wants to tell her that she’s trying her best. She wants to tell her that she’s tired, that the pressure is mounting, that shockingly, the only person that’s made her feel better about all of this so far is Nico.

But she’s much too drained to fight right now. So she does what she’s done most of her life. Karolina apologizes.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t even thinking Olympics when Sochi rolled around because I was only 14. And last year, Junior Grand Prix was stressful, but… this is just different, you know?”

Karolina notices her mother relax just the slightest bit, looking at her with an almost motherly gaze now.

“I do, but the fact is we don’t know where you’ll be in another four years. Beijing may not even be an option.”

The fact that Leslie is already thinking years from now is enough to make Karolina want to scream.

“I know. But you have to understand that I’m still adjusting.”

“And you should understand that this season isn’t about being Nico’s best friend,” Leslie replies coldly.

And again, Karolina snaps.

“And I just think I should be allowed to decide who I associate myself with. You really think you can dictate who I speak to?”

Leslie eyes Karolina carefully, and she instantly regrets her decision to speak.

“Well, I see Miss Minoru is terrible at keeping secrets. See what she’s doing, Karolina? She’s trying to tear us apart.”

There’s so much to unpack—the way Leslie blames Nico, the way she frames it in such a way that there’s no way Leslie is at fault, that Nico is the unhealthy piece of the relationship, even while admitting she had in fact instructed Nico to stay away.

But she’s spent.

“How about we just focus on my actual skating?”

Leslie checks the time on her phone, probably realizing that Molly and Chase have been waiting for several minutes now.

“Fine. But anything less than a gold at this competition, and I’ll have to speak to Nico about keeping her distance.”

Karolina doesn’t look up at her mother, only stares listlessly at the carpet.

“I have to go now. I’ll see you at the rink later?”

Karolina nods and falls back against the pillows before the door slams shut.
Nico comes back to her hotel room to find Karolina dozed off in her bed. Even in sleep, she seems focused, but a lot less comfortable—eyes shut tightly in what looks like a restless sleep.

It’s odd, spending this much time with Karolina. It certainly wasn’t what Nico had expected even just a few days ago when they’d gotten here. She watches the other girl for a moment, thinking back to their conversations from last night.

_you don’t know a damn thing about me._

_only because you never let me._

It’s haunting, almost, how that poised nature of Karolina could also come out in darker ways Nico never thought she’d see. Karolina is portrayed in a certain light, always has been—determined but kind, confident but humble, artistic and beautiful.

Nico wonders how much of that is actually the real Karolina.

Nico goes to take a shower, preparing to head to the rink to watch Chase and Molly, and comes out expecting Karolina to still be sleeping—which is probably why the blonde looks mortified when Nico comes back out with only a fist clutching her towel shut while she reaches around in her luggage for clothing.

_“Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty.”_

Karolina still looks stunned and probably still half-asleep as Nico turns back to her after grabbing a shirt and pair of jeans.

_“Um, yeah,” _she laughs. _“Uh, I guess I was really tired or something.”_

She’s not sure why Karolina is acting so shy—she’s a skater for God’s sake. She’s been in plenty of locker rooms.

Nico figures that it’s just her “pure and innocent” nature as she disappears back into the bathroom to change, not wanting to scar Karolina for life by undressing in the same room.

She re-emerges to Karolina tapping away on her phone.

_“You want to head over soon? I’m sorry you’ll be stuck sitting with me.”_

_“Huh? No. I mean yeah, I’m ready to go. And I don’t mind.”_

Nico had meant it as a lighthearted joke that Karolina had completely missed. She’s distant, off, and it’s weird to see her so…not bubbly.

Then again, she also has never spent this much time with Karolina. Nico wonders if this is what she’s usually like behind the scenes. She wonders if this is the toll that having Leslie Dean as coach and mother takes on someone on a regular basis.

And even though Karolina seems to only be interested in friendship to piss off Leslie, Nico doesn’t hate having her around. She’s still mad—about her popped axel and about everything else under her sun. Karolina has always seemed so graceful and kind in the midst of all of the pressure, and its infuriating because Nico doesn’t know how.
But, the more Nico sees of Karolina, she realizes that maybe they aren’t so different.

She thinks back to earlier in the day, when Karolina seemed so very insecure. It was almost endearing, to see so many different sides to someone portrayed in the skating world as confident, sure of herself, but sweet.

She’d mostly been anything but sweet. (Granted, that was mostly due to Nico’s provocation.)

But as a result, Nico also didn’t know what to do with that.

Which is why she’s barely talked to Karolina since last night.

Which has, apparently, made Nico look like more of an asshole than anything.

So she figures she should try a different approach. (She’s not good at this, the whole female friendship and empowering other women kinds of things that Gert gets so passionate about.)

“Are you doing okay? Did Leslie give you shit about hanging out with me?”

Nico pretends she doesn’t see the hurt flash across Karolina’s face just as quickly as it disappears. Nico wants her to know that she cares, but she also doesn’t want to pry.

“No, I’m just really tired. And she’s just being typical hardass coach Dean.”

Nico smirks, because the more she hears Karolina speak, the more she likes her.

“Wow, I’ve never heard you cuss so much.”

“To be fair, you’ve heard me talk more in the past week than you have in seven years,” Karolina answers quickly, never looking up from her phone.

Nico wonders if she’s done something wrong.

When she doesn’t answer, Karolina finally looks up and adds, “I’m not as pure and innocent as everyone makes me out to be.”

And, oh, there are so many directions she could take that, but as much as Nico is trying to be nice, Karolina doesn’t seem too receptive of it.

So instead of concern, what comes out of her mouth is, “So you and Chase have boned.”

It’s a joke, and her subtle way of trying to do recon on the whole Karolina-Gert-Chase triangle that seems to be unfolding.

“What? I’m—no. Oh my god, no,” she sputters. “Why? Did he tell you that we did or something? I’m going to—”

Well, that settles that.

“Relax. I’m joking. Though it is terribly painful to watch him with his crush on you while Gert pines after him.”

Karolina laughs.

“Gert’s crush on Chase. Now that is one thing that we can agree on.”
Nico decides to leave it at that. They should be leaving now anyway.

“You want to head over?”

Karolina nods and grabs her purse, heading toward the door.

As they leave, Nico presses just a little further. Just because she can.

“So should I send her a bunch of snapchats of closeups of his ass or do you want to?”

Karolina gives Nico a half-hearted glare, shaking her head.

“She might get the wrong idea if I do,” Karolina reasons.

“Mmm, fair.”

//

Chase and Molly end up fifth after the short dance, respectable for their first ever international competition and the fact that they’re both still so young. Karolina knows that her mother is playing the long game with them—they’ll be strong Olympic contenders in the years to come, but this year is more for seasoning and growing as a pair than anything. The main focus in 2018 is on Gibborim’s ladies’ singles.

Of course, even with nine other people in the event, Karolina and Nico end up back to back in the starting order for the Ladies’ free skate, with Nico skating second to last and Karolina closing the event. Nico expects for Leslie to do little more than hold her water bottle, thinking that all of her focus will be on her daughter. She doesn’t even mind it, seeing as she really only got a coach because US Figure Skating wouldn’t send her to the event without one. Now that she’s here, she could manage psyching herself up for the long program. Which is why it comes as a surprise to her that, as she lines up at the door with the other skaters, waiting to take the ice for her six minute warm up, Leslie starts talking to her.

“Make sure you don’t let your artistry fall by the wayside in the second half of your program. Keep those arms engaged and fully skate the choreography. I’ll be with you before you skate, and then Aura and Frances will be with you in the Kiss and Cry while I put out Karolina.”

Nico nods, still half wondering if Leslie is talking to someone else, even though she doesn’t have any other skaters in this event aside from her and Karolina.

//

Nico lands her triple axel cleanly, and Karolina steps onto the ice after seeing it with a pit in her stomach, but it all seems to fade when her music starts and the audience falls silent. Her mother makes a show of giving her a big hug in the Kiss and Cry when the scores come in, painting them again to be the perfect mother-daughter duo as its announced that Karolina has won gold, with Nico in second.
Karolina is excited and relieved, but Nico barely says a word to her on the podium. Molly and Chase greet them after with cheers and congratulations, but Nico’s “thank you” is cold. Molly and Chase stand awkwardly, like they’re trying to figure out what to say to diffuse the situation or just run away completely, when another voice joins them.

“Congrats on the win, Karolina.”

Karolina whirls around to see Alex Wilder smiling shyly.

“Thank you, Alex.”

Alex turns his attention to Nico immediately, as if addressing anyone else in the group is merely a formality.

“Although, I do have to say, Nico, that triple axel was amazing.”

Nico’s expression changes quickly as she smirks with pride.

“You looked great out there,” he adds.

Karolina is almost positive that she sees Chase turn away so he can roll his eyes, while Molly stands next to him, seemingly oblivious to the situation.

“Thanks, Alex,” Nico replies, and it seems much more genuine than the thanks she gave Chase and Molly.

“You guys headed back to the hotel sticking around? Nico, you wanna catch up?”

Karolina frowns—not at the thought of Alex and Nico hanging out, she tells herself—but at the difference in how she’s treating Alex from Chase and Molly.

Nico almost seems nervous at his proposition, as if she only expected a confidence boost in front of everyone and then for him to move on.

“Um, I’m sure Leslie wants to see us before anything else.”

Alex tries (and fails) to hide his disappointment.

“Of course. Right.”

“I’ll text you?” Nico offers with a smile.

Alex smiles back, and Karolina’s blood boils.

Later that night, she sees Nico in that damn towel in her dreams.

Karolina has no idea what that means, if anything.

Chapter End Notes

hey we are poppin' the BIGGEST bottles now that deanoru is canon in the show and in the comics.
Chapter Summary

everyone finds out about chase and nico's personal lives. leslie has a proposition for nico. nico and karolina are NOT getting along. chase intervenes. and karolina makes a self-discovery.

Chapter Notes

WE BACK.

sorry for the giant hiatus but with skating season in full swing and runaways season 2 just around the corner, the creativity is flowing once again. i really hope this chapter makes up for the wait. its HUGE as far as moving the story forward. there's so much going on lol. and thats all i'll say for now! enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Your movements are half-hearted. You’re not selling me on the piece.”

Nico is so not in the mood for Leslie today.

She’d woken up to several texts from friends and family asking how she’s doing.

Everybody knows about her father and Mrs. Stein.

She doesn’t know how, not sure she wants to know. But word travels fast in the figure skating world.

(Nico honestly wonders if it wasn’t Leslie who said something.)

“I’m not sure how to do that with this music,” she sighs.

Leslie is annoyed, has been harder on her in the couple days since they got back from China.

“Then why did you and Janet choose it?”

Nico shrugs. She knows why. At the end of the day, Janet never believed that Nico could market herself as an artistic skater. Hence the push for the triple axel.

“She was more worried about highlighting my strengths and ignoring the artistic part. She never thought I’d get it down.”

Leslie nods, appears even more frustrated with Nico after her answer.
She honestly can’t tell if the frustration is directed at Nico or at her former coach.

“So instead of skating to something original, you thought it would just be wise to do what’s been done to death?”

Yes, Nico thinks. Because that’s what she’s good at. Because she knows what will happen if she connects with a song too much. She knows it’ll open up every frustration and heartache she won’t allow herself to heal from.

Nico keeps the music she can connect to for her off-ice playlists.

“Nico, I’ve been thinking.” Leslie continues. “How would you feel about changing the music for your free skate?”

Is she out of her fucking mind?

“Excuse me?”

Leslie rolls her eyes.

“You’re clearly not going to improve artistically with this current piece.”

Nico feels her stomach cramping, that low, nauseating pain that blooms whenever someone broaches sensitive subjects.

“And I have Rostelecom in less than two weeks,” Nico reasons.

There’s no way she can just expect Nico to have a new program ready for next competition.

“We wouldn’t be changing it for that. We probably wouldn’t even have it for the Grand Prix Final, if you qualify. But we could attempt it at Nationals.”

No, absolutely not. Realistically, that was a lot of time to train it. But that’s not a lot of opportunity to perform it in competition.

“You want me to go into the Olympics with a new free program?”

Leslie smirks at Nico’s confidence. It’s infuriating. It’s so condescending.

“If I remember correctly, you need to qualify for the Olympics first.”

She’s so annoyed. Nico hates Leslie for doing this, for trying to force her into this headspace. For probably having something to do with leaking information about her father—fuck, even if she didn’t. Nico’s pissed. She wants to go home. Wants to cry it out with her sad music at home.

Not here. Never on the ice.

“Why do we have to do this?”

“Because it’s clear that you need to get out of your comfort zone.”

Why is she doing this? Nico’s been under the impression mostly that Leslie wants her to succeed, but not too much. So why is she so invested in making her a more complete skater?

“Do you want me to beat Karolina?” Nico finally asks, venom in her voice.
Leslie narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, gliding on her blades closer to Nico, and uses the couple inches in height she has on her to advantage.

“As a mother, of course not. As a coach, while it can remain difficult to be unbiased, my goal is to bring home Olympic medals. I am putting all of my skaters in the best position possible to do so. Whether or not you choose to take my advice is up to you, Miss Minoru.”

Leslie makes Nico feel small. Makes her feel weak, despite her coach’s odd methods to try to build her up. Nico doesn’t work that way, but then again, maybe that’s not Leslie’s goal. Maybe Leslie’s goal is to mess with her, or to piss Nico off so much that the best way she can get back at Leslie is by being better. By beating her daughter in competition.

(And if that’s the case, it’s working.)

“I’ll have it picked out by the end of the week.”

Nico turns and pushes off on her skates to keep practicing.

Twenty minutes later, when Nico is huffing and puffing at the boards after drilling her jumps again, she hears the scratch of blades sharp against the ice and someone sliding up alongside her.

It’s Karolina.

“Hey, Nico.”

Nico knows that technically they were on track to becoming friends. But that was also before the competition had ended. That was also before Karolina had stood higher than her on that podium. That was also before Nico’s life was suddenly everyone’s business.

She just doesn’t want to talk.

Nico feels like she’s 11 again, her mother furious that she could somehow allow Karolina to beat her at Nationals.

“Hi,” Nico responds flatly.

Karolina’s so amiable, so friendly, clearly just wants to check up on Nico.

She hates it.

“So we haven’t gotten the chance to chat lately, and I just thought—”

Nico cuts her off. She doesn’t want small talk with Karolina. She doesn’t really want anything with Karolina.

“About what?”

Karolina tenses visibly, picking up on the standoffish vibe Nico is clearly putting out there.

Karolina is kind and caring and wants to help, but Nico knows she’s also smart. Knows when to back off.

Most of the time.

She also knows Karolina can be annoyingly persistent.
“Oh,” Karolina stumbles over her words a little. “Um, mostly Gert and Chase. I think they’re finally making some progress.”

“Well good. Then it means that we can stay out of it.”

Nico tries to ignore the way Karolina takes a few steps back, but Nico can feel her eyes on her.

And then, because Karolina is persistent, Nico hears her reply.

“What is your problem now?”

Nico doesn’t want small talk with Karolina.

And she most certainly doesn’t want this.

“Excuse me?”

Nico turns to face Karolina now, who has one hand grasped firmly on the boards, anchoring herself there, the other digging into her hip, her face harder than Nico has ever seen it.

Nico thinks she might even be more upset than the other night in their hotel room when Karolina finally snapped at her.

“What’s your problem?” Karolina repeats. “You said we were friends, and I’m pretty sure friends communicate with each other.”

“I thought you knew that was all for show.”

Nico regrets it as soon as it comes out of her mouth. The way Karolina’s face falls, the way her hold on the boards wobbles just enough for Nico to notice. She’s being mean just to be mean, and Nico knows it’s a knee-jerk reaction and a shitty thing to do.

But Nico doesn’t think she’s a good enough person to stop.

“Well, then I don’t really understand the point behind our conversations when my mother isn’t around.”

“And neither did I. Hence the not talking to you.”

Nico chances a look at Karolina, whose eyes are glossy with tears that she looks desperate to hold back. Nico just wants her to stop and go away. She doesn’t understand Karolina’s investment in this. Nico doesn’t understand why she doesn’t just save herself the trouble of attempting friendship with her. It’s not worth it.

“Is this because I beat you?”

Nico turns to Karolina again, the tears in her eyes replaced with more anger.

This is pointless. They only bring out the worst in each other.

And yet Nico can’t bring herself to just walk away.

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m making it pretty clear.”
Nico lets out a caustic laugh.

“You’ve gotten awfully brave lately, Dean.”

“Oh come on. After the competition all the sudden you decide the only skater worth paying attention to is Alex Wilder?”

Nico stiffens at that. She and Alex had a complex relationship. They’d met around the same time she and Karolina had, as they were all rising up through the levels at the same pace. He was the first boy to take an interest in Nico, her first kiss, and last year, her first (almost) boyfriend.

She cared for Alex, she really did. But as soon as the relationship started to become more than physical, Nico had broken it off. It was too much. She didn’t want to be emotionally attached. That didn’t stop them from sneaking off to make out or do more over the course of the next couple months after they’d broken up (when Karolina had walked in on them at Nationals), but it had stopped after that.

The discomfort of someone else knowing (even though Nico knew rationally that everyone had known), someone seeing, was enough for Nico to almost completely stop talking to Alex altogether.

“That is none of your business,” Nico bites back.

“Oh I know, and I wish I could wipe my memory of the San Jose bathroom incident.”

“That was how long ago now? Grow up.”

Nico realizes her voice is loud enough that its echoing through the rink. Most of the skaters continue their practices, the arguing probably being drowned out by the music, but the few that are close enough to the two of them turn their heads in curiosity as they go by.

“No, Nico. You grow up,” Karolina answers, this time in a whisper. “Because apparently you can’t even be friends with someone who happens to have a better skate some days.”

Nico’s stomach drops at that. It hurts. She doesn’t want it to. Doesn’t want to care about Karolina or Alex or anyone or anything they’re talking about.

It’s confusing. It’s all so confusing.

“Why are you so invested in this?” Nico finally asks.

She just has to know, and Karolina frowns at Nico before responding.

“Is it lonely?” Karolina asks softly.

“What are you talking about?”

“The way everything has happened. You moved cross-country by yourself and still mostly keep to yourself. Isn’t that lonely?”

*It’s really not any of your business.*

“It’s really—”

But Karolina cuts her off.

“No. I don’t want you to answer right now. I want you to really think about that.”
And with that, Karolina skates off.

Nico knows that being alone and being lonely are often two different things.

Right now, she’s not sure which one it is.

//

Karolina walks into the coffee shop later, her heart still pounding from her conversation with Nico earlier. She feels sick to her stomach about all of it. That Nico clearly doesn’t think that she’s worthy of anyone at the rink caring about her. That she has to take it out on people the way she does. And that Karolina would only make it worse by giving her an ultimatum of sorts.

Nico can be exhausting at times, but god, when she finally lets her guard down…

Karolina likes that.

And for whatever reason, Karolina finds herself thinking about Nico more often than she probably should.

(Karolina thinks she might know the reason. She just won’t admit it—not to herself and not to anyone else.)

She joins Gert and Chase at a table.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Chase greets her.

“Aawful.”

Gert rolls her eyes and says, “I swear to god if you and Nico are fighting again…”

“What happened now?” Chase asks.

“Why are you looking at me like its my fault? She started it.”

Gert rolls her eyes again, and Karolina just shrugs.

“Well, what happened?” Chase asks again.

“I just wanted to know why she hadn’t talked to me for a couple days, asked if everything was okay. And she blew up at me.”

Gert tosses the book she’s been holding on to the table and dramatically speaks as if Nico is in the room.

“Damn it, Nico, and your brooding ways.”

“To be fair, a lot of people have approached me today asking how I’m doing with the whole thing about our parents’ affair. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what’s bothering her,” Chase offers.

Karolina’s heart sinks. It’s still not an excuse for how Nico had spoken to her. But she knows that above all, Nico likes to maintain her privacy, especially about something like this.
It makes perfect sense.

Karolina feels bad for pushing her.

“How did people even find out?” Gert wonders.

Karolina thinks about who knows, who would have said something. Certainly not Nico herself. Or Chase. Or Molly and Gert.

Mrs. Stein or Mr. Minoru could have said something to a friend and word got back around, but Karolina is almost positive that Molly and Gert’s parents don’t even know. They would know before Mrs. Stein and Mr. Minoru told anyone else.

Karolina also knows that Leslie is aware of the situation, had asked Karolina about it after Chase had told her, saying that Nico had approached Leslie about coaching her for that reason.

She doesn’t want to believe it, but Karolina doesn’t put it past her mother to “let something slip” to another coach she know can’t keep a secret or who loves to fuel the rumor mill.

“I bet Leslie said something,” Karolina finally says, nothing but disdain in her voice.

“I still can’t believe she told Nico to stay away from you,” Gert replies.

“Yeah, well we’re all learning how difficult my mother can actually be now that we’re old enough to form our own opinions.”

Karolina looks down, toying with the lid of her latte. Chase and Gert remain silent in front of her, probably surprised to see Karolina so outwardly opposed to her mother.

“I’m sorry, Kar,” Chase offers in a soft voice, reaching for one of her hands that’s playing with her coffee cup.

Karolina sneaks a glance at Gert, who quickly looks away and pretends to busy herself with the book in front of her.

“It’s, uh, it’s okay. Thanks,” she replies, politely giving Chase’s hand a squeeze before pulling back.

Gert pretends not to pay attention to the exchange.

“This sport is problematic enough without your mother trying to drive wedges between possibly empowering female friendships,” she replies, presumably wanting to ignore whatever Chase just did.

“Well, I don’t think Nico’s very interested in friendship,” Karolina answers.

“Let me talk to her and see what’s wrong,” Chase suggests.

She kind of wants him to do it, but she also wonders if he’s just doing it solely for Karolina and this budding interest he’s seemed to take in her.

“That’s really not necessary, Chase.”

“I just want to help,” he replies, shrugging and giving her a soft smile.

Gert slams her book shut with enough force to cause Chase to lose his focus on Karolina’s face.

“Well, I have to go. Study. So, I’ll talk to you both later,” Gert declares, rushing to pack up her
things and leave abruptly.

Karolina feels awful.

Chase cocks his head to the side, clearly confused by Gert’s actions as his gaze follows her out of the coffee shop.

They remain silent for a few minutes, Karolina turning to her laptop, pretending to do her online homework but not able to shake how uncomfortable she is.

It’s not that Chase himself is making her uncomfortable. She trusts him and appreciates his friendship.

But she doesn’t want to upset Gert.

And she still has zero interest in dating Chase.

“So you want to get dinner or something?” Chase asks casually, with an inviting grin on his face.

She can’t lead him on like this. Karolina closes her laptop and sighs.

“Chase, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He shifts in his chair, the smile disappearing.

“Oh, okay. What’s up?”

She’s not even sure how to word it. Karolina has evaded attention from guys before. But she’s never had to turn down one of her best friends.

“A lot of people, even Nico, seem to be under the impression that there’s something going on here.”

Chase nods understandingly, but Karolina can see how quickly his confidence is fading.

“Well, do you want there to be?”

No.

She doesn’t.

And Karolina feels like she should—everybody loves Chase. Karolina loves Chase.

Just not like that.

Karolina thinks back to that day at the rink when he called her beautiful, how thrown off she had been, how much she’s thought about why she didn’t care or like that Chase had said that.

How much she’s thought about if it has anything to do with how hard she’d blushed the first time she saw one of the other girls at the rink in a sports bra.

How much she’s thought about if it has anything to do with how she’s always valued her female friendships above anything else.

How much she’s thought about if it has anything to do with how she’d had the fleeting thought that she liked girls when she was 13 when she saw on a friend’s Facebook that they identified as bisexual or pansexual, only to push it way down deep and force herself to never think about it again.
Karolina definitely isn’t ready to tell him (or anyone) any of that, but she can start small.

“I’m sorry, Chase. I just want to be your friend.”

He’s visibly deflated, though he tries to hide it. Karolina tries to ignore the sheer sense of relief that washes over her, because she does still feel bad that she has to cause any pain to a friend to do it.

“Oh. That’s okay. I’m sorry if I overstepped—"

“If you need some space, I totally understand.”

Chase shakes his head and finally meets Karolina’s eyes.

“No, its fine. I’m sorry if I made things awkward.”

He says it with such sincerity, like he knows that maybe there’s something else that Karolina isn’t telling him. But most of all that he respects her and is probably beating himself up internally for making Karolina uncomfortable. She knows him well enough to know that about him.

“Forgiven.”

He begins to gather his things.

“Well, I’m going to head out then. Maybe see what Nico is up to.”

Karolina nods and adds, “Tread lightly.”

Karolina stands and leans in to give him a hug.

“It’ll be okay. See ya, Kar.”

“Bye Chase.”

She sits back down, content to be alone.

Karolina knows the reason she thinks about Nico more than she probably should.

And she can finally admit (part of) that to herself.

//

Nico has spent the entire afternoon trying not to think about her fight with Karolina.

Which is literally the opposite of what she had wanted. She’d thought her whole brooding front who drive Karolina off, but instead she’s sitting in her kitchen with Chase, thinking about the question she had posed earlier.

Is it lonely?

“What’s got you so upset?” Chase taking a seat at the kitchen table with her.

“Nothing,” Nico assures him, staring intently at her laptop.
“You’ve been staring at your laptop for ten minutes without moving,” Chase notices, leaning out of his chair toward Nico to look at her screen. “That word doc is still blank.”

She looks up at him. He has an amused smile on his face that quickly falls away once he sees Nico’s face.

“Do I come off as a loner?”

Chase just looks at her, confused and again, a little amused.

When Nico doesn’t say anything else, he adds, “Oh, you’re serious?”

“Chase…”

“When we first met all those years ago, you held me at arm’s length, literally, sometimes. And we were supposed to be pairs partners.”

Nico lets her lips move briefly into a small smile, appreciating that Chase is choosing to take this seriously. She thinks about how awkward they were as pairs partners—Nico never trusting him to lift her, and Chase always tensing up at Nico’s apprehension (which inevitably led to even more falls).

“No wonder that didn’t work out,” Nico remarks.

“I remember you specifically saying, even at that young age, that you thought you were better suited for singles,” Chase recalls fondly.

She shrugs and answers, “Because I didn’t have to worry about anyone dragging me down.”

“Because you didn’t have to worry about letting anyone down,” he challenges.

Nico hates moments like this. Chase is so observant when it comes to her, a product of having grown up together. And apparently even with their time apart, it hasn’t changed anything.

“Why are you still holding everyone at arm’s length?”

He stares Nico down, hard. Its intense and not something she’s had to deal with from him in years. She can’t look at him. It’s just as uncomfortable as she remembers.

But Nico also knows she probably needs it.

“Why are you still holding Karolina at arm’s length?” he adds, softer this time.

This causes Nico to look up. She isn’t surprised that he probably knows more than he’s letting on, probably has talked to Karolina about this today.

But that’s another battle for a different time.

“I’m more perceptive than you give me credit for,” Chase comments.

Nico knows. She knows that. And part of her is upset with herself that Karolina is so clearly upset that she confided in one of Nico’s closest friends. The other part of her just wishes so badly she could undo it for the sake of not having to think about it.

Chase continues to prompt her when she doesn’t respond.

“So why are you doing this?”
Nico deflects.

“Just who I am, Chase.”

“No, Nico it’s not. It’s toxic.”

Toxic.

That hurts.

Nico glares back at him.

She knows what he means. She’s built up this unhealthy pattern for years, and she’s not sure she wants to stop it. Not sure she cares enough to stop it.

“You’re not a bad person,” he continues. “You’re someone who’s dealing with some extenuating circumstances and has been for awhile. But you can’t get through this alone.”

Nico shakes her head and finally answers.

“I don’t need to burden people with my problems, Chase.”

“You’re not burdening them. You got out of therapy as soon as you possibly could after Amy—”

Nico cuts him off.

“Don’t.”

Chase looks angry now. And Nico considers putting herself on the offensive, thinks about what she could say to shut it down. How they were only friends from ages 8 to 13, and they’re completely different people now. He needs to stop acting like he knows her.

But even Nico knows that isn’t true.

She’d literally been coached by his mother until about a month ago. He’d sat with her when she cried about rink drama or family problems or everything with Amy. And even though Nico had done her best to shut him out after he’d flown across the country just for Amy’s funeral, she can’t do it now that he’s sitting in front of her.

Because Chase is probably the best friend she’s ever had.

And then she’d barely talked to him for five years.

How fucking sad is that?

“No, Nico. You never healed. You never fully processed. In a lot of ways you’re the exact same girl I saw at Amy’s funeral.”

She wants to be mad at him. She wants to scream and throw something and do anything but confront this.

“And I don’t necessarily mean that in a good way,” he adds, as if he needs to clarify the meaning.

But Nico is exhausted, and she feels like it takes actual physical strength to keep holding up the thick walls she uses to keep people out.
So she has to let them fall just a bit.

“I’m scared,” she mutters, just loud enough for Chase to hear.

“Of what?”

“Of how much I’ll feel. About what I’ll find if I try to work through it all again.”

He nods solemnly.

“Is that why you continue to choose songs you hate and can’t connect to for your programs?”

She’s so tired. She just wants to kick Chase out. (It is her apartment after all.)

But Nico knows she needs this. Knows that they both need it.

And Leslie’s going to make her change her free skate program anyway, so she might as well get over some of this before she goes searching.

“Probably. Yes. Even though Leslie is trying to fix that. She wants to change my free skate music.”

Chase doesn’t look as surprised as she thought he would. But then again, Nico wonders if Leslie has given him and Molly similar speeches.

“Then maybe that’s your first step. Maybe a new program can be a form of self-expression.”

“You want me to sit on the ice and cry for four minutes?” Nico replies sarcastically.

Chase pokes her arms and rolls his eyes.

“The judges would eat it up, Nico thinks. And a higher component score means a higher overall score. Which means more medals. Which means Olympics.

(Nico is well aware of all the emotional work this will require her to do. But she’s not ready to think about that yet and decides to convince herself with other benefits.)

“I’ll think about it,” she finally says.

Chase sighs, and Nico tenses, because she’s pretty sure he’s about to drop something else on her.

“I also think you need to apologize to Karolina.”

“Chase, why would she even want to be around me—”

“Hey. No. No more of that,” he interrupts. “No more telling yourself you’re not worthy of people’s kindness.”

Nico knows he’s going to hold her accountable to that too.

“Karolina’s a good person and a wonderful friend. And she cares about you.”

Nico scoffs at that suggestion.

“I just don’t get why.”
Chase opens his arms and offers Nico a hug. She falls into him and lets him hold her tight.

“I do,” he whispers.

Nico has to hold back tears at Chase’s words.

She’s pushed him away and shut him out. And Chase is still here through it all, trying to drag Nico forward.

Once Chase leaves awhile later, Nico opens her Spotify to all the songs she’s never allowed herself to consider for programs.

Chapter End Notes

these messy kids have so much work to do! WE LOVE A BABY LESBIAN FIGURING OUT HER FEELINGS AND OUR EMOTIONALLY STUNTED QUEEN.

again, hit us up on tumblr at @everybodyhatesjroth and @longlivetheheda.
seven

Chapter by ehj (caskettcase)

Chapter Summary

karolina seeks advice from gert. nico picks a new free skate song and makes an apology. and karolina totally does not have a crush on nico.

Chapter Notes

SO. this chapter is 6528 words long. enjoy!

yo i definitely headcanon gert as bi/pan, so get ready for some good solidarity this chapter. also if you've watched the new season, tell us what you thought! message me us on tumblr at @everybodyhatesjroth and @longlivetheheda because i am SOFT and have lots of deanoru feelings.

also! its not explicitly stated until very late in the chapter, but the song nico has picked for her new program is "she used to be mine" by sara bareilles, so give that a listen while reading. i played around with a few different songs, but i absolutely love this one and was inspired by gracie gold making it her free skate this year (she hasn't actually performed it yet but i already know im gonna be a basket case when she does because this is her comeback season after being in treatment for an eating disorder and I HAVE LOTS OF FEELINGS.) okay enough about me and my favorite skaters.

read about your favorite fictional skaters instead.

- ehj

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karolina has barely slept the past three nights. Chase has given her kind, understanding smiles from across the rink, but she’s gone out of her way to actively avoid him. She knows its not even Chase, really. It’s not really that she wants to avoid him. It’s what he represents that Karolina desperately wants to compartmentalize.

She has her next Grand Prix event in France coming up. She’s already being considered one of the favorites to win the Grand Prix Final, barring any extenuating circumstances where she wouldn’t qualify.

It’s really not the time for her to give much thought to a sexual awakening.

But the more she thinks like that, the more Karolina wonders well, when is? She’s told herself since she was 13, when she saw friends experimenting with different labels and figuring out their own identities, that maybe someday, she’d do the same.
And being a daughter of Leslie Dean, Karolina learned to compartmentalize from an early age.

Karolina has no idea how her parents would react to this news. That she’s a lesbian. She wonders if both her mother and father will say they’re fine with it, that they love her no matter what, that they’re proud of her for being honest with herself and with them. She wonders if they’ll say all that to her face only to grapple in silence with how this news would impact their family’s public image. Karolina knows realistically, in her mind, it would do nothing bad. Frank only has something to gain from being seen as the supportive actor using his platform to advocate for his daughter. So does Leslie.

But she knows that they won’t see it that way. They just can’t.

She knows them both too well. Karolina knows exactly how this is likely to pan out.

She thinks about when she was younger, overly invested in a friendship with a girl in her middle school named Emily. (Karolina knows looking back now that she can call it her intense crush.) It was when Karolina was still in public school, before skating became her entire life, before Leslie’s intensity as a coach could overwhelm her childhood completely. She was twelve, and Emily was just another girl in her class.

In the time she’s spent over the past several weeks, Karolina has cross-examined her past friendships to death, pulling out all the evidence she missed (avoided) pointing to what she’s really wanted this whole time. And just like with Emily in sixth grade, Karolina has found herself captivated by certain girls, finding herself never wanting to be second best on their list of friends, savoring every conversation, trying to come up with the least “creepy” (the only word young Karolina knew to describe it then, she realizes) way to show them how much she’d cared about them.

Now that Karolina has finally stopped hiding it from herself, she doesn’t want it be just her secret. She’s too confused, the weight of it is too much.

She wants to tell someone. To maybe find advice. But at the very least, to start to lift a weight that feels like a cinder block sitting on her chest.

Karolina knows who she wants to talk to, who of her friends she’d feel most comfortable sharing this with (even though it still feels extremely uncomfortable). She wants to discuss this with someone who’s a safe option, someone she know is outspoken about the rights of the marginalized and probably knows more about the LGBTQ+ community than Karolina does at this point, who’s been in this situation themselves.

So naturally she goes to Gert.

Karolina finds her at the rink already setting up for a children’s birthday party that not’s happening until much later in the day, up on a ladder and hanging streamers from the ceiling.

Gert sees her before Karolina can say anything and drapes the streamers over one of the rungs of the ladder.

“Can I help you with something?”

Karolina glances all around the room, trying to see if there’s anyone possibly within earshot, shifting her weight back and forth under the weight of Gert’s gaze.

Karolina knows that Gert is probably still upset about Chase. She doesn’t know she turned him down, doesn’t know Karolina definitely doesn’t want this to come between the two of them.
And maybe this is a bad idea.

“Gert, can I talk to you about something?” Karolina asks, barely above a whisper, head still on a swivel for anyone who might come in unannounced.

Gert sighs and grabs one of the streamers again, continuing to hang them up.

“Is it Chase-related?” she asks.

“What?” Karolina asks, stepping closer. “No, Gert—"

“We get it, you know. He likes you. You probably like him. It’s just how—"

“Gert, that is literally the opposite of what’s happening.”

Finished with the current decoration in her hands, Gert turns toward Karolina to see her pacing back and forth around her ladder.

Karolina has known Gert since they were eight, when a five year old Molly began taking lessons at the rink. They never saw much of each other until Gert began working at the rink when she and Karolina were fourteen, about a year after Chase moved out to LA and moved in to a room in the Yorkes’ to be Molly’s dance partner.

She’s fascinated by the whole dynamic, really. How Chase has forged such a strong sibling relationship with Molly but a weird, butting-heads with a side of sexual tension relationship with Gert all while living under the same roof.

Karolina has gotten to know Gert well enough over the years to know she’s had a crush on Chase since he moved here, how awkward she’d felt about it when he’d first moved in.

And the last thing Karolina wants is both Gert and Chase, two people she cares about so much, upset with her.

“Please believe me,” Karolina pleads. “I told Chase I’m not interested.”

Gert gets down from the ladder, crosses her arms and stands in front of Karolina.

“When?”

“Last night. After you left.”

“Okay.”

Gert shrugs, reaching for a set of one dozen small skating-themed party hats to place around the table.

Karolina sighs. Gert is fiercely loyal, but she’s also stubborn. And over the past year, the unspoken rift growing between them due to Gert’s growing interest in Chase and Chase’s growing interest in Karolina has become impossible to ignore.

(Karolina also knows that Gert is extremely frustrated with herself for letting Chase get in the way of their friendship. She has Molly to thank for that information.)

“Gert, I’m sorry that this got so—"

“So what is this about, then?”
Gert says it with a bite, but when she drops the party hats and looks up at Karolina, visibly uncomfortable, she seems to back down a little bit.

Softer this time, Gert asks, “Does this need to take place in a more private setting?”

Karolina nods timidly.

She knows she can trust Gert, knows logically that Gert will do nothing but support her.

“Probably, yeah.”

“Leslie’s busy with Chase and Molly anyway. She won’t notice if I’m gone.”

Gert motions for Karolina to follow her, and she leads them toward the back of the rink.

“But what if someone comes—”

“Who is going to show up at this rink at ten o’clock on a Wednesday morning besides the people who are already skating here? Trust me, I know the clientele of this place pretty well by now.”

Karolina follows Gert around the back of the large building to the doors of a storage room.

“You’re sure you won’t get in trouble?”

“Come on, Karolina, I thought we were doing a better job at teaching you about rebellion.”

Gert plucks the key from her ring of the many that unlock the vast majority of the doors to Gibborum, unlocking the doors and ushering Karolina inside.

Gert finds two lawn chairs that used to sit outside during the spring and summer months, and Karolina takes a seat across from her.

“So what’s going on that you decided you wanted to come to me for help?”

Karolina has planned out what she wants to say but has no idea how to introduce it. She considers just blurting, “I think I’m gay,” before sighing and trying to give a brief outline.

“So, I’ve, uh… um, I’ve always appreciated your… progressive, I guess, world views. And you seem to know a lot about these kinds of things…”

Gert gives her the strangest look.

She’s so bad at this.

“God, this is so stupid. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

Karolina shifts in her chair and thinks of getting up and leaving for a moment, but a gentle hand on hers anchors her back down.

She’s so nervous. She knows Gert will be so supportive. But she’s so nervous, Karolina actually feels like she might start crying.

“Karolina. It’s okay. You’re safe. Anything you tell me will be kept secret. I promise.

“Okay,” she whispers.

The hard part now is that Karolina knows that she has to bring up the topic of Chase.
But maybe this will ultimately make things better with Gert, if she knows everything.)

“Okay, so…god, I hate to bring up Chase, but I feel like its necessary backstory and—"

Gert cuts her off with a sigh.

“Karolina. It’s fine. You can tell me.”

She looks at Gert for reassurance, and her friend reaches across and grabs Karolina’s hand once more, giving a soft smile and nodding.

Okay.

She can do this.

“Chase has made comments for the past few months kind of hinting that he was interested in me, like, romantically. And, at first, I just ignored it. And its not like he was ever pushy or creepy about it, that’s not like Chase.”

“But you still didn’t want it to be happening,” Gert adds, nodding in understanding.

“Yeah. And I kept feeling like I should like him back, you know? I think I’ve always felt that way. Even when we were younger and I got scared when someone would mention playing Truth or Dare or Spin the Bottle or something. I chalked it up to being young and just not old enough to be interested in dating. I remember my mom was always so proud that I ‘had a good head on my shoulders’ or ‘wasn’t boy-crazy.’”

Karolina sighs in relief that she’s made it this far, that she’s able to verbalize some of these things she’s held in her head and heart for so long.

Karolina doesn’t let herself pause for too long, afraid she’ll lose the momentum.

She lets the next words fall out of her mouth quietly, like she’s still afraid that someone other than Gert or herself will hear it.

“But I don’t think I’m ever going to feel that way about a man. Like… 99% sure.”

Gert gives another understanding nod, letting the silence between them settle. Karolina doesn’t say anymore. She desperately wants Gert to just say something.

“And what about…”

Gert leaves the question open-ended, presumably waiting for Karolina to fill in the blank rather than assume anything.

“Girls,” is all Karolina says in explanation.

Karolina looks at Gert again, who’s fighting off a wry smile at Karolina’s answer.

“Uh, yeah,” Gert responds, a bigger smile on her face now, more compassionate.

“I don’t… I don’t even think I can say it.”

“You don’t have to if you’re not ready to put a label on it. But whatever that label is, please remember that its not a bad word or something.”
Karolina lets out a long, shaky breath. She’s thankful. Thankful that Gert knows how to handle this with such understanding, that she doesn’t launch into a monologue about the plague of compulsory heterosexuality or something.

“You know you’re the first person I’ve ever said any of this out loud to.”

“Oh, Karolina.”

Gert stands and reaches her arms out in offering to Karolina. She stands and lets herself be hugged tightly, and when Gert finally lets go, Karolina feels like she’s beginning to let go of the shame she’s been held onto for so long.

“Thank you for trusting me with this,” Gert says as they sit back down.

Karolina nods, and they sit in silence for a moment.

(Karolina realizes she hadn’t really planned anything beyond this.)

“Do you want to talk about it more?” Gert offers after a minute.

Karolina shrugs.

“Like, what about it?”

“I don’t know. Any girls that you like?”

Karolina’s heart skips a beat. It’s weird, and it’s a scary thought—openly talking about girls she’s liked. But it’s freeing. It feels normal, and she finally understands the appeal of talking about crushes when she could never understand why her friends always wanted to when they were younger.

Her heart stutters again when the first girl that comes to her mind is Nico.

Because she definitely doesn’t have a crush on Nico.

Karolina has just happened to see what Nico looks like immediately after she’s been kissed, skin flushed, lipstick smudged, hair messy, breathless. She also just happens to know what she looks like in a towel after a shower.

It’s not a big deal. Nico probably hates her anyway.

Karolina realizes she’s probably been quiet for too long, zoned out staring at the ground, when she looks up and sees Gert staring at her with an amused smile.

Karoline blushes, but Gert doesn’t say anything.

“I mean, no. I don’t know. Not right now, I guess.”

Thankfully, Gert drops it, but Karolina knows she’s probably filing that information away and wondering who Karolina is thinking about.

Whatever.

They sit in silence for a few minutes longer before Gert asks if Karolina is okay.

“Yeah. I’m better now. I think.”
Karolina actually believes it when she says it. Feels the relief of being validated, of being understood.

“I don’t mean to pry, but have you thought about telling your parents?”

Karolina has. A little bit. But not enough to actually flesh out a plan of telling them. And she knows that Gert means well, but that’s a topic she’s not ready to approach yet.

“Honestly, no. Not really. I think I just need a little time for me to be more comfortable and tell my friends who I know will be supportive.”

Gert nods and then suggests, “You should tell Chase.”

“What?”

Karolina is taken aback by the proposal at first, but after telling Gert, suddenly, the idea of talking to Chase doesn’t seem as scary anymore.

“When you’re ready, of course. I know things are awkward, but he’s still one of your best friends.”

“I don’t—”

“You deserve to have people who care about you supporting you, Karolina.”

It’s that statement that causes Karolina to pause, to reframe things. That it maybe isn’t so much about her telling people to be less scared or to feel less like she’s keeping a secret from someone, that she’s somehow lying to them, but about being honest with people in her life like Chase on how they can support her. So that they can support Karolina when she finally does decide to tell people who may not.

“I’ll think about it.”

//

“So you’ve selected a song then?” Leslie asks Nico as she pulls into the center of the rink after her warm-up.

“Yes,” Nico answers simply.

Nico has known what song she’s wanted to skate to for over a year, since she put it on a secret Spotify playlist.

“Tell me why you chose it. Tell me how it makes you feel.”

But one reason, among many, Nico has never even attempted this kind of program before is because she feels like she has to justify why—like she’ll have to somehow defend that it makes her think of Amy, makes her think of her parents, makes her think of all the shit that has taken place over the past several years that has left her scared of who she’ll become when she loses anything or anyone again. Like someone is going to tell her, “Oh no, you can’t pick that song. It’s too emotional. You’ve identified with it too closely.” It makes her feel raw, vulnerable.

But Nico isn’t about to tell Leslie that.
“I don’t think—”

“Well how else am I going to choreograph it if I don’t understand the message you’re trying to get across?”

Nico swears she can physically feel herself deflating. She’s had plans for this program for months, not ever expecting to skate to it, but if nothing else to serve as a creative outlet.

But of course Leslie wants to do it herself. She knows what she’s doing. Nico doesn’t. She can almost feel the statement coming out of the look on Leslie’s face: What do you know about choreographing a program?

She chances it anyway.

“And what if I want to help choreograph it?”

Leslie shakes her head.

“No, I need you focusing on Moscow. We fly out in one week, and for now, I need you focused on what we have. Let me worry about Nationals.”

“And if you want me to feel comfortable with it, then please let me help.”

Leslie rolls her eyes, placing a hand on her hip and taking a moment to scroll through her phone.

“Shame that the change in program didn’t come with a change in attitude.”

Every day, Nico can feel her tolerance her Leslie’s coaching methods steadily declining.

“Do you want me to qualify for the Olympics or not?”

Leslie gives her another look, one that Nico knows means something to the effect of don’t question my authority.

Calmly, Leslie pockets her phone and turns fully back to Nico.

“Let’s table this discussion for later. We need to run Firebird.”

She’s only run it once in competition this year, and Nico is already so tired of it. She wants her own program. She wants her own choreography. And pissing off Leslie seems to somehow outweigh the anxiety that comes with thinking about performing such an emotional piece.

So Nico tries the bargaining route instead.

“If I land my triple axel consistently today, will you consider it?”

Leslie rolls her eyes, and Nico’s not entirely sure if she means it when she says, “Maybe.”

And Nico does. She lands her triple axel cleanly 3 of the 4 times she attempts it before Leslie has her run the majority of Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite. (And she lands it cleanly then too.)

Leslie yells for her to make more dramatic gestures with her body during the choreo sequence, to loosen up in the step sequence, to at least for the love of god Nico act like you’re enjoying it.

Nico knows that she’s only marginally improved in these areas since her last competition. But its like she has some kind of mental block keeping her from any sort of breakthrough.
She just doesn’t care enough.

It isn’t until the last run-through, Leslie barking orders to Nico as she transitions from a combination triple lutz and triple loop into her next element that she just decides she’s going to make it up as she goes along. Nico does her best to “connect” with the music but instead lets all her emotion come from the anger she’s feeling, has been feeling, at Leslie.

The anger at how she’s treated Karolina. How she’s pissed that it’s been almost a week, and Nico still hasn’t been a decent enough person to apologize.

Leslie seems satisfied with the result, and Nico gives her half-truth answer when she asks what changed during that round, telling Leslie she just was applying herself more.

(Nico leaves out the part about her anger at Leslie driving Karolina into paranoia about who she can and cannot hang out with.)

Leslie doesn’t say anything else about choreography for her new program, and Nico doesn’t push it. That’s a battle for another day.

Nico walks into what she’s hopeful is an empty locker room, only to find Karolina lacing up her skates.

Nico really hasn’t seen her much since last week. They’ve been skating at different times, just missing each other or only glancing at each other while the other probably isn’t looking while on the ice, Nico thinks. She wonders if Karolina is avoiding her or if it’s just coincidence.

Not that Nico was. Not at all (or so she tells herself). But she definitely feels cornered now. She can’t turn back around and leave without making it obvious that she feels uncomfortable.

But Karolina deserves an apology.

Has deserved one.

Karolina finally looks up as Nico takes a few steps further into the locker room, taking a seat on a chair across from Karolina as she begins to untie her skates.

“Hey,” Nico offers.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m just about done, and I’ll get out of your way.”

Karolina looks down again, focusing much too intently on how precisely her skates are tied for someone who has been skating since she was three years old.

And Nico hates herself all over again for making Karolina feel like this. Like they can’t even be in the same room anymore.

“Getting ready for France?” Nico asks, a plea for normalcy, a plea for Karolina not to bolt out of here before Nico can say she’s sorry.

Karolina’s hands freeze, and she sits up to look at Nico for longer than a fleeting glance. Nico swears she can almost see a hint of a smile.

“Yeah, at least my mother won’t be having an aneurysm about us competing against each other.”

“No, save that for the Grand Prix Final,” Nico quips.
“If we make it,” Karolina replies, ever the realist, even though Nico thinks that Karolina has to know that considering the likely competition in Grenoble, Karolina should easily medal and likely, win.

“If we make it,” Nico corrects.

Karolina nods and laughs softly at that. Nico takes the diminishing tension as an opportunity.

“Hey, I just wanted to apologize for the other day.”

“Oh.”

Karolina is looking down again, this time focused on a loose thread on her leggings. Nico feels the discomfort continuing to creep through her body and wonders if apologizing is going to fix things immediately or force them to wade through more of their problems. She hates it. But Nico wants to do better. Needs to do better. As uncomfortable as it feels.

She thinks back to her conversation with Chase a few days ago.

Everyone at the rink deserves that from her.

Karolina deserves that from her.

“Yeah, there was really no excuse for me to treat you that way.”

Karolina finally looks up at her again. Her gaze is softer this time, less anxious, and a lot less angry than the last time they spoke.

Nico pours as much sincerity as she possibly can in when she says, “I’m sorry.”

Karolina nods, smiles, and rises from her chair, balancing on her blades as she walks over to sit beside Nico.

“Nico, I accept your apology.”

Nico lets out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding and Karolina continues.

“But Chase also told me that you had just found out that a lot of people somehow found out about your parents. So, I think I can cut you a little slack.”

Nico’s first thought when Karolina says that is to remind herself not to be angry with Chase. Everyone knows anyway. And Chase was surely just looking out for her, trying to advocate for her.

“Please don’t be mad at Chase for telling me. I was just trying to find out what I did to make you upset.”

Something softens in Nico when she hears that. Chase hadn’t gone seeking Karolina out but the other way around. Nico can’t understand it—she’s treated Karolina terribly, especially lately, and she goes out of the way to make sure Nico is okay, to find out what could possibly be triggering her to lash out like that.

Nico can’t quite comprehend how a person can carry that much light within them.

She used to think it was annoying, performative almost.

Now, Nico’s just in awe.
Karolina keeps rambling.

“And look, I don’t know what you’re thinking happened, but if my mom said something…Nico, please know, I don’t agree—"

“Regardless of whether or not Leslie said something, I know its not your fault.”

Nico almost feels like she’s meeting Karolina for the first time again, like that night they fought in their hotel room, when they finally saw a different side of each other. She’s reflective, and self-aware, and so opposite the obedient, brainwashed, willing Gibborum poster child Nico has long thought Karolina is.

Nico feels like maybe she’s waking up to just how much damage she’s caused (and could cause) by putting up such thick walls around everyone, around Karolina.

“Karolina, why do you care so much?”

Karolina furrows her brow, looks at Nico in pure confusion.

“About what?”

“About what I think of you.”

Nico immediately realizes she could have worded that better as Karolina’s brows rise and her eyes widen. Like Nico’s accidentally unlocked some unspoken secret.

Or maybe Karolina’s just surprised that Nico is curious about this all.

She doesn’t think about it too hard.

“What, no…it’s not, it’s not that, I just—”

Seeing her sputtering, Nico clarifies.

“I’ve been an ass to you, especially lately, and yet you seem so willing to forgive me. Why?”

Karolina just stares back at her like the answer is obvious.

“Because I know you have enough people holding things against you that you can’t control. And I know what that feels like.”

Nico hates that in such a short time, Karolina has seemed to learn to read Nico so well. She constantly feels like she’s letting someone down—Leslie, her parents, Chase… maybe if Nico somehow could have saved Amy, her family wouldn’t be falling apart. Her dad wouldn’t be having an affair. And then Chase’s life wouldn’t have turned upside down either. And she wouldn’t have had to move out here and ruin everyone’s lives at Gibborum. Maybe if—

Nico also knows she needs to do better to keep herself from spiraling into that thought train.

But Karolina’s right.

It is lonely.

“Thank you,” is all Nico says in response.

“Of course.”
Karolina gives her one last small smile, as if to symbolize that they’re better now. Nico just nods and
reaches over to gather her things.

Karolina rises and is headed toward the door when she turns around once more.

“Hey Nico?”

“Yeah?”

“Sometimes on Wednesday nights when my mom has to leave early for some board meetings, I’ll
stay late and practice more. It’s kind of nice. No one’s here to bother you…”

Nico already knows where Karolina is probably going with this but chooses to play dumb.

“That sounds nice.”

“My mom told me you’re changing one of your programs for Nationals. If you wanted to practice it
tonight, you’re welcome to join me.”

“Oh.”

Karolina shrugs, plays it off like she’s sorry she suggested it.

“You don’t have to, it was just a thought.”

“No, its just I don’t have any choreo.”

It’s a lie, and Nico knows that this would be a perfect opportunity to finally bring all the ideas she’s
had to life. But Karolina is probably just being nice, doesn’t actually expect her to say yes.

“Maybe we could work on it.”

“Oh, your mother made it pretty clear she didn’t think I should be focusing my efforts on that and let
her worry about it.”

Karolina frowns and seems to take that as her answer.

But Nico’s really getting sick of seeing Karolina sad.

Oh, what the hell.

“Well, technically, she said she’d maybe let me help if I hit my triple axel today.”

Karolina smiles, realizing that Nico is considering the offer.

“You landed it perfectly every time today.”

Nico raises her eyebrows in surprise that Karolina was clearly watching her during practice.

“I mean, from the one I saw,” Karolina recovers, trying and failing to make it sound casual.

Nico smiles and counters, “Aren’t you worried Leslie will find out you’re sneaking me out there for
extra ice time?”

She’s almost convinced.

“Honestly, everyone knows about it. Everyone is just usually so exhausted already that they don’t
come. And she won’t. I’ll see you here at 8?”

Karolina stands in the doorway, waiting for an answer, when Nico finally nods.

“Yeah. See you at 8.”

//

Karolina shivers as she glides over to meet Nico. She chalks it up to the cold of the rink and the fact that she hasn’t warmed up yet. Definitely not that she’s suddenly nervous around Nico.

But Nico stands sheepishly at the boards, like she’s still not quite sure how to act around Karolina.

Like they’re both thinking about how things seem to go sideways when its just the two of them having a conversation.

“So were you going to run your programs too or…?”

Karolina shrugs.

“Uh, it’s whatever you want really.”

Karolina wonders for a moment if this rift between the two of them is going to be too much to overcome but squashes the thought almost immediately. Karolina feels like they owe it to each other to at least try to be friends.

(It has nothing to do with the fact that Karolina just really finds herself wanting to spend more time with Nico.)

“I mean, did you have ideas for your new program? What song did you pick?”

Karolina watches Nico, who seems to be internally debating with herself about something, until she finally blurts out, “So, I actually have a pretty good idea of what I want to do.”

Karolina finds herself impressed. She knows that Nico has always struggled in her component scores, has often been called out by fans and commentators for her ability to be so technically sound but struggle to really perform. She also knows that her mother has been trying to get Nico out of that. But if there’s anything Karolina has learned about Nico in the past several weeks, its that the girl is not very forthcoming about feelings.

Which makes Karolina all the more interested in what song Nico has chosen and the fact that she feels strongly enough about it to want to make it entirely her own.

“You choreographed it by yourself?” Karolina asks, doing her best to keep the admiration out of her voice.

Nico rubs the back of her neck and looks down at the ice, twisting a toe pick into the ground.

“I mean, kind of. Not all of it.”

“Why didn’t you tell Leslie that?”
Nico looks at her like it’s obvious, and Karolina knows the answer. Leslie Dean isn’t exactly the kind of person you think of when you think of people to share the details of trauma with. Karolina knows this all too well.

“Do you want to try it out?”

“Do you think I could try it alone first? Like, you turn around or something?”

“Oh. Sure. Of course. I guess we should, like, warm up first?”

“Yes, of course. Probably a good idea. Don’t want to explain an injury to Leslie.”

They laugh awkwardly, and Karolina feels her heart beating faster as a flustered Nico skates away. She follows behind and the two skate around in comfortable silence. Karolina starts practicing spins, and Nico sets up for a jump. Karolina finds herself focusing harder, adding as much flair as she can while she floats around.

Like she’s unconsciously trying to impress Nico.

Which she’s not.

Maybe she just wants to remind Nico how good she is.

Yep. Totally it.

Karolina grabs her water bottle as she turns to see Nico underrotate a jump and curse. She immediately sets up for another when she notices Karolina watching. Nico leaps into a triple flip and bobbles on the landing.

Karolina can’t help but wonder if them watching each other is having the same weird effect on Nico as it is her.

Karolina returns to the ice and continues putting herself through her paces until twenty minutes later, Nico calls out to her.

“I’m good now, I think. You mind if I try it out?”

Karolina smiles brightly and nods. She’d honestly begun to wonder if Nico was ever going to try it, or if the night would just continue with them skating around each other in silence.

“Okay. Cool,” Nico replies, and Karolina can tell her confidence that she’s built up the past half hour is quickly fading again.

“I’ll just go put the music on. You mind starting it?”

“Yeah. And then I’ll just… not watch,” Karolina replies, doing her best to be supportive.

“Cool. Yeah. Sounds good.”

Karolina follows Nico over to the speaker system, plugging in her phone and pulling up the song. Nico heads back out onto the ice and calls out to Karolina to start the music as she gets into a starting position.

Karolina turns around and presses play, the beginning chords of “She Used to Be Mine” ringing through the empty rink.
Karolina doesn’t know the song very well, has heard it maybe once or twice, but she can quickly tell
from the lyrics and just from knowing Nico that this is a much more personal choice than anything
she’s ever done.

Karolina sneaks a glance as Nico lands her triple axel and then glides around the rink somewhat
aimlessly, occasionally miming a jump or some sort of movement that she hasn’t quite figured out
yet.

She can’t help but keep watching.

The song builds into the end of the second verse, and it’s clear that Nico has this next part planned.

You’re not what I asked for
If I’m honest, I know I would give it all back
For a chance to start over
And rewrite an ending or two
For that girl that I knew

Karolina has never seen so much emotion on Nico’s face, has never seen her movements so
committed. It’s almost painful to watch as it’s obvious—the longing that Nico has to change the past,
the frustration she has at the present, the way she visibly looks like she’s searching for a way to
protect a younger Nico from all of it.

It’s haunting.

Karolina can’t bring herself to look away. Nico, the skater everyone has pegged as a jumps and spins
machine only, is putting on a masterclass in performing right in front of Karolina’s eyes.

Nico skates around, deep in thought, the last several measures of the song, again looking as though
she’s trying to figure out what should fill up the space. And then Karolina watches as Nico collapses
at the very center of the rink as the music ends. Karolina looks away as she hears a stifled sob from
Nico.

It’s extremely quiet. All Karolina can hear is the sound of her own breathing and Nico’s gasps, a
combination of physical and emotional exhaustion. Karolina gives Nico a few minutes of silence, still
looking away, letting her come down from the emotions.

Karolina isn’t sure how welcomed her presence will be, but she puts a timid foot out onto the ice and
skates over to Nico.

Nico is staring at the ice, her breathing evening out now, and Karolina reaches out a hand to help
Nico stand.

Nico takes it, still barely looking up.

“Hey,” Karolina offers quietly. “You okay?”

Nico finally looks up at Karolina and asks, “Did you watch?”

Karolina smiles.

“Yeah, a little bit.”

Aside from the performance just minutes before, Karolina isn’t sure she’s ever seen Nico look as
vulnerable as when she proceeds to ask Karolina what she thinks of the program.
Karolina doesn’t even know how to answer. It’s devastating. It’s heart wrenching. It’s mesmerizing, its not even done yet and its…

All the words Karolina comes up with seem to fall short though. Nico just bared her heart and soul for her.

“It was…”

But Karolina just trails off, shaking her head.

“That bad, huh?” Nico replies, and Karolina knows she’s only being partially sarcastic.

“Nico, that was amazing. And its not even finished.”

Nico shifts uncomfortably at Karolina’s praise.

“I’ve never seen you connect to music like that. And your jumps are so effortless. Your spins looked so elegant…and that I’m used to seeing. But the emotion. Nico, that was…”

Karolina knows the way she’s looking at Nico right now is nothing short of awe-struck, but she can’t will herself to care. Nico deserves it.

Nico just laughs and looks away again.

“Sorry. I’m rambling.”

“By all means, keep going,” Nico quips.

“You should show Leslie.”

Nico just shrugs and shakes her head.

“Maybe after Rostelecom.”

Karolina gives her an empathetic look, suddenly remembering all that Nico has to focus on in the next week. Because they both know that if Nico is going to qualify for the Grand Prix Final, she’ll mostly likely need a first or second place finish in a competition where she’ll have her work cut out for her.

“Right.”

Karolina again finds herself in awe of Nico, confused by this weird dynamic they’ve developed. How they’ve gone from intensely competitive to screaming matches to heart-to-hearts, oscillating back and forth trying to figure each other out.

Now more than ever, Karolina finds herself drawn to Nico. Drawn to the kind, sensitive person she can be when she lets Karolina see.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What changed?”

Karolina wants to know, wants to know how they can best get past the growing pains of being around each other so much so suddenly, how they can keep changing their narratives of each other
from rivals to something else.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Karolina answers. “A couple days ago we were fighting, and… you just seem a lot more receptive to social interaction all the sudden.”

Nico smiles, and Karolina wonders why it doesn’t feel like this when someone like Gert or Chase smile at her.

“Decided it was lonely.”

Karolina fails to hide the smile that takes over her face at the realization that Nico has given so much thought to what she’d said when they last spoke.

“I really am sorry, Karolina.”

And Karolina knows from the sincerity in Nico’s voice that this time will be different.

“Thank you.”

Nico looks at her like she’s not entirely sure what Karolina could be thanking her for.

“For letting me be the first to see your new program,” Karolina explains.

“Just wanted to give you plenty of time to prepare for me to beat you with it.”

Karolina laughs as Nico reverts to their old banter, but there’s no venom to it this time.

Yes, this time will be different for sure.

“Ah, there’s the old Nico,” Karolina jokes.

Nico smiles and turns to skate off toward the exit of the rink, turning around once more.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Nico says with a smile, leaving Karolina alone at the center of the rink.

Karolina stays for a few minutes longer but leaves soon after Nico, too distracted thinking about seeing her again.

Chapter End Notes

shoutout to my sixth grade crush emily for being partial inspiration for karolina's arc this chapter! you're the real mvp.

also, if you listen to the song, the line "and gets used by a man who can't love" isn't about alex. i think thats clear but just want to clarify that its more flexing on her dad lol.

also wow i love lovestruck karolina she's so SOFT.

again, comments and kudos are always welcome here and on tumblr! (everybodyjatesjroth and longlivethehedea).
eight

Chapter Summary

gert thinks karolina has a crush on nico. karolina tries way too hard to convince herself she doesn’t have a crush on nico. meanwhile, nico competes in russia and finds herself at the center of the figure skating world’s attention.

Chapter Notes

so before y'all get started reading, we both just want to say how absolutely blown away we were by the comments for chapter seven. i was really self-conscious about it, particularly karolina’s coming out scene to gert, so hearing how much people enjoyed that REALLY meant the world to both of us. we both love this fic so much (i can’t believe its been almost a year since we started it lmao YIKES) and love sharing it with you, so again, thank you for loving it as much as we do.

now, on with the slow burn!

- ehj

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s Chase’s idea for the group to meet at the Yorkes house early that morning to watch Rostelecom. He actually had tried to get everyone to come over while it was happening live, but Molly quickly vetoed the idea of having to be up and functioning at 4:15 in the morning on a day they weren’t required to be at the rink early.

So, instead, they’re huddled around Gert’s laptop at six in the morning, using their phones as little as possible to avoid spoiling any results.

“Okay, but seriously, whose idea was it for us to get up at 6am to watch this?” Molly grumbles, leaning on Chase’s shoulder sleepily.

“Because any later and we’ll probably be bombarded with spoilers,” he reminds her.

“Nico would probably tell us to go back to sleep,” Molly answers.

Gert peers over at Karolina, who’s largely remained silent so far. She’s anxious to see how Nico has done, fiddling with her phone.

“Well, Karolina appears to be texting her, so thanks for ruining that one,” Gert notes.

Karolina freezes, pressing a button on the device that makes the screen go dark. She and Nico have gotten into the habit of texting over the past couple days since she’s been gone, mostly Nico complaining about Leslie’s antics, and Karolina responding with some sort of encouragement.

She likes it, that they finally seem to have gotten past the growing pains of being around each other
all the time.

For now.

Karolina hopes it stays that way.

“I—I mean I hadn’t texted her yet,” Karolina answers, shrugging, feeling self-conscious suddenly. 
Like she needs to justify her actions for some reason.

She doesn’t. She’s just talking to Nico, after all.

Just being nice.

“I was just going to tell her we were watching and looking forward to see how well she did.”

Chase gives her a confused look, like he’s not entirely sure what’s changed in such a short amount of time that Karolina would be on a texting conversation level with Nico. Gert gives her a similar look, but Karolina can see the wheels turning in her friend’s head. Molly appears oblivious, dozing off on the end of the couch.

“Well, we don’t have to be at the rink until 9 so can we please just fast-forward to Nico? Or at least group two? So I can go back to sleep?” Molly mumbles through a pillow she’s commandeered.

“All in favor?” Gert says, guiding the cursor to about halfway through the video feed.

“Sounds good to me,” Chase answers.

Karolina quickly goes back to her phone, trying to avoid Gert’s gaze as she quickly sends off a text to Nico.

KAROLINA DEAN

hey! me, chase, gert, and molly are about to watch you skate! can’t wait to see how well you did!

Her phone buzzes about halfway through the first skater’s program, causing everyone to look and wonder who else would be up at six in the morning.

NICO MINORU

go back to sleep.

Molly cranes her head over to read the text, which Karolina is trying not to smile at.

“See? I told you,” and with that, Molly leans back on the couch again with a muffled reminder to the rest of the group to tell her to open her eyes when Nico is on.

Karolina waits a minute, until the skater’s program is over and they’re in the Kiss and Cry waiting for scores, before she texts Nico back.
Gert catches her.

“What is Nico all saying?”

Karolina just shrugs.

“Oh, nothing really. Aside from that we should go back to sleep.”

Gert gives her another strange look before going back to watching as the next competitor takes the ice.

Karolina feels her phone vibrate in her hand and can’t keep the smile off her face when she sees Nico’s name pop up.

**NICO MINORU**

_ how are things back home? gibb
  hasn’t burned down yet?_

She stifles a small giggle at that, because she knows at this point Nico is just wanting to keep the conversation going. It’s not even that funny of a joke. She just… appreciates Nico wanting to talk to her.

Nothing weird about that.

Right?

“Okay, now what is she saying?” Gert pries again, leaning over to try to see.

Karolina knows Gert means well, but her friend seems especially invested in what’s happening in their conversation right now.

She can’t quite figure out why.

And it’s kind of annoying.

For whatever reason, Karolina just wants to keep their conversation to herself.

It’s a privacy thing, that’s all.

“Text her yourself. She’s just asking how things are going here,” Karolina replies.
And then, she adds, before she can convince herself not to:

*very funny. everything is fine.*

*KAROLINA DEAN*

*just waiting for you to bring us something gold. ;)*

She waits impatiently through the second skater’s program for a response, her phone laying face down on her thigh. She picks it up a couple times just to see if she’s somehow missed a notification.

Karolina can feel Gert’s eyes on her every now and then as she does so.

They’re showing replays of some of the skater’s elements when she finally feels her phone buzz again, turning it over way too quickly.

*NICO MINORU*

*miss dean, are you trying to get spoilers out of me?*

Karolina feels a strange, pleasant feeling settle in her stomach. It’s faint, and she’s pretty sure she’s blushing a little bit, and she’s not really sure why.

It’s not that big of a deal, but she can’t help but feel like Miss Dean could almost be read as…flirty?

No, it’s not that. Nico doesn’t even like girls. Karolina doesn’t want her to like girls. It’s fine. It’s just Nico. It’s no big deal. Everything’s just heightened because she’s admitted to herself now that she’s a lesbian. She’s just particularly thoughtful about her interactions with other women right now. It’s fine.

At least, that’s what Karolina’s telling herself.

While Karolina tries to settle from the short-circuit in her brain caused by that harmless phrase, two new texts come through.

This time, from Gert.

*GERT YORKES*

*you are literally making heart eyes at your phone.*

*GERT YORKES*

*what is going on*
Karolina’s heart nearly stops as she reads what Gert is implying. First, her jaw drops, and then she feels like she wants to crawl into a hole and die.

She avoids Gert’s eyes as she carefully thinks of a response.

\begin{quote}
KAROLINA DEAN
just because you know i’m gay doesn’t mean you need to read into every interaction i have with girls!
\end{quote}

It’s deflecting, but it’s true. And Karolina knows it’s a surefire way to make Gert feel guilty for assuming.

Still, her friend shoots her a glare from across the couch.

Karolina looks away and instead thinks about what to reply to Nico.

“Hey, Nico’s next,” Chase announces, everyone’s eyes falling on the laptop screen as Nico skates to center ice in her red short program dress, a picture of elegance and focus. The commentators go quiet as the opening bars to her Black Swan program fill the air.

Karolina quickly texts back.

\begin{quote}
KAROLINA DEAN
no because we’re literally about to watch you skate :)\end{quote}

It only takes a couple of seconds, and when she returns to watching, Nico is effortlessly floating through her step sequence. Her short program is definitely the stronger of her two this season, and Karolina wonders if because she has to pretend to connect to the music for a shorter period of time, that maybe it’s easier for her to fake it well for two minutes instead of four.

But honestly, the program still looks better than it ever has.

Karolina has seen Nico skate enough that she knows when her performance is half-assed. Casual onlookers can’t see it. Sometimes the judges can’t even see it. But Karolina sees her day in and day out, knows this program too well (it’s not weird—they train at the same rink, after all, she tells herself).

But this? This actually looks real.

Nico pauses at the end of the rink before heading down the ice, beginning to weave and turn through her step sequence as the violin builds. She rotates one direction and then the other, spinning in tight circles and gliding on smooth edges. Her crisp turns are flawlessly executed, accompanied by arm
movements that highlight the notes of the music as she skates.

She flies into a triple lutz triple loop combination, landing easily before using the other half of the ice to set up for a triple flip. She twirls and glides, her personality taking up the ice. And now Nico has one jumping pass left, and that’s her triple axel.

At the last competition, her first time attempting the jump in a competition, Nico popped the jump in the short program, only doing one and a half revolutions as opposed to the three and a half required. In the long program, she’d landed it cleanly and sent the crowd into an absolute frenzy, despite the fact that she ended up second to Karolina.

Karolina knows that right now there’s more buzz in the skating world about Nico than her. (She hears about it from Leslie only all the time.)

But Karolina can’t even bring herself to care as the crowd roars when Nico once again lands her triple axel cleanly once again.

“Her triple axel is more consistent than Wilder’s,” Chase comments.

Karolina smirks at that but can’t help feeling annoyed at the mention of Alex’s name.

And of course, Karolina turns from the screen, where Nico is finishing up with her spins, to see Gert eyeing her.

“Maybe he’s been giving her tips,” Gert offers, her eyes never leaving Karolina’s, and she knows that now Gert is just trying to get under her skin.

“I don’t really think they talk that much anymore,” Karolina replies, looking back at the screen and trying to avoid Gert.

Karolina thinks about how Alex and Nico’s brief interactions even at Cup of China bothered her and pushes it out of her mind just as quickly. It’s confusing. Karolina still can’t pinpoint exactly why it bothers her so much. Alex is probably a nice guy. It shouldn’t be worrying her this much.

She just can’t stop seeing Nico wrapped around him in San Jose whenever someone says his name. (But it’s not a big deal. Not at all.)

(She’s not jealous.)

Gert pulls Karolina out of her thoughts with another remark.

“And since when are you president of the Nico Minoru fan club?”

“I’m just saying.”

“Guys, shhh,” Molly, who has woken up for Nico’s program, says as Nico finishes her program to the applause of the ground and fans throwing flowers and stuffed animals onto the ice.

Karolina watches as she picks up a teddy bear and bouquet of roses before sliding over to where Leslie waits off the ice.

“She killed it!” Molly says.

“That was awesome,” Chase remarks.
“She seems to be emoting a lot better,” Gert notes.

And Karolina smiles, because she’d like to think that Nico finally having the agency to pick a new program that she enjoys, while she hasn’t debuted it yet, has helped with that. That she’s finally having a breakthrough with her performance skills.

Leslie hugs Nico as she comes off the ice, and Karolina knows its mostly for show when the microphones pick up Leslie telling Nico that she did “a fantastic job,” but her mom almost seems pleased with Nico’s performance, a feat in itself. The camera follows them as Nico waits for her score, Leslie seated beside her, not saying anything else to Nico but instead staring intently up at where the scores will be read.

Karolina hears the voice of the announcers saying, “The scores please,” and holds her breath.

80.87

Nico’s jaw drops at about the same time Karolina’s does because she knows that she’s just broken the world record.

That Karolina had just set at Cup of China.

“Look at that score!” Chase almost yells, receiving a shhhh from Gert and Molly, whose parents are still asleep.

The most entertaining part of the whole thing is the look on Leslie’s face. Karolina knows her mother well enough to know that internally, she’s torn that Nico has broken her daughter’s record but externally is entirely a picture of shock and joy over Nico’s performance.

And at the end of the day, Leslie still coaches the world record holder for the ladies’ short program, even if Nico’s not the student she wants to be holding it.

And with that, any unwelcome thought of Alex congratulating Nico for her performance falls away as Karolina focuses on sending Nico a text about her performance.

KAROLINA DEAN
not bad. :)

Nico responds almost immediately.

NICO MINORU
thanks. someone’s been sneaking
me more practice time. really
helping the 3A.

NICO MINORU
thank you for that, btw.

And Karolina smiles again at that because even though the occasional Wednesday night after-hours
practice sessions are no secret to anyone but the coaches, it feels like something that belongs to her and Nico now. As if Nico’s new program, her sharing it with Karolina first, is enough to completely wipe out any other memory she’s ever made during that practice time.

It’s special.

Karolina puts her phone away before anyone can make a comment.

“So there’s still two more skaters. Are we watching or no?” Gert asks.

“I mean, it’s only the short program. Won’t take too long,” Chase replies.

“Karolina?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Karolina resists the urge to pick up her phone when she hears it vibrating again, forcing herself to sit through the last two skaters and pay attention. Unsurprisingly, no one comes close to Nico’s score, and at the end of the short, she sits in first.

Karolina takes the opportunity to finally look at her texts.

NICO MINORU
she almost seemed happy
with how I did. :P

Karolina reluctantly decides to leave Nico be for the rest of the day. Gert begins packing up her
laptop, everyone else milling about to gather their things. Molly goes upstairs to go back to sleep. Chase heads into the kitchen to make breakfast.

“Well, I have to get to work,” Gert says. “Karolina, are you coming to the rink?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Karolina replies, suddenly regretting the fact that she’d said that she would carpool to the rink with Gert this morning.

They head to Gert’s car in silence, the only sounds being the engine starting and the click of seatbelts.

“So…,” Gert begins as they pull onto the road, and Karolina can already tell where this is going.

She’s going to want to talk about Nico, about Karolina’s apparent (and totally not accurate) “heart eyes,” and how close they are all the sudden. And how that somehow must factor into the recent discovery that Karolina likes girls.

It’s all coincidence.

That’s all.

“Can we please not talk about Nico?”

Karolina sees the smirk on Gert’s face as she answers.

“I was going to ask if you wanted coffee.”

Oh.

Karolina clears her throat, suddenly very interested in finding Gert’s aux cord and drowning out the awkward with whatever music she deems appropriate.

“That’d be great,” Karolina mumbles.

They pull into a drive thru a few minutes later, again having remained silent since Gert asked about coffee. But Karolina shifts in her seat uncomfortably, feeling the need to confirm once and for all:

“I don’t have a crush on her.”

“I never said you did.”

“You sure seemed to imply it when you texted me, and I quote, that I was making heart eyes at my phone.”

They take a pause in the conversation to place their orders and once they’ve moved past the window, Gert replies, “I just didn’t realize you two had gotten close.”

Karolina shrugs. She’s afraid to call them close friends so soon, especially after Cup of China, when Karolina had thought then that they’d moved forward only for Nico to pull away again.

She’s still stuck on Gert’s subtle comments and… Karolina panics for a second: if Gert thinks that Karolina has a crush on Nico (which she totally doesn’t)… does Nico think that too?

What if she’s messed everything up again already?

“I wouldn’t say close,” is the answer that Karolina finally settles on.
“Finally moved past your differences then?”

“Yes. And bonding over our occasional annoyances with my mom.”

“And skating together?”

Karolina hands Gert some cash, and the barista offers them their drinks. Karolina gives her a look of surprise as she does because how does Gert know about that?

“Chase told me. Nico probably told him.”

“What did Nico say?” Karolina asks before she can stop herself.

“Oh my god, are we in middle school?” Gert answers, rolling her eyes.

“No, I’m just wondering.”

“Chase has been trying to help Nico with working through some things. That’s all. He’s the one who suggested picking a song that’s really personal to her.”

She nods and continues to wonder internally what Nico had told Chase. Karolina momentarily considers making a comment about Gert and Chase to take the focus away from her.

“Well, she did.”

“You’ve seen it?” Gert asks as they pull into the rink parking lot.

“Yeah, last week.”

Karolina thinks back to the empty rink, the sound of Nico’s blades on the ice and the piano chords, the intense silence that followed as Nico had sat down on the ice after.

She wonders if she’s doing the “heart eyes” thing again when Karolina catches Gert watching her with raised eyebrows.

“It’s really good,” is all Karolina says in response.

Gert turns the car off but doesn’t move to exit the car. She just nods thoughtfully, taking a few moments before responding to Karolina.

“Well, I’m glad you two are getting along,” Gert answers, although Karolina can see that she wants to say so much more.

“Me too.”

When Karolina steps onto the ice about an hour and a half later, after spending some time in the off-ice room stretching and practicing jump technique, the air in the rink is lighter, less tense without Leslie around. There’s also less people, some skaters taking the opportunity to sleep in or get away with calling-in-sick excuses. She warms up, runs her short program, goes through the motions in preparation for her next event in two weeks.

But she misses the weird, and welcomed now, tension that comes with her and Nico sharing the ice. Karolina even finds herself thinking about the parts of Nico’s program that remain unfinished, playing with little ideas she’s wanted to run by Nico to help her finish it.

(Well, she’s trying. It’s not like Karolina has downloaded the song on Spotify and listened to it
several times in the past few days. Because she totally hasn’t.)

Karolina jots a few notes down on her phone to mention to Nico when she gets back, practices for awhile longer and goes home to have dinner with her father.

The next morning when she wakes up, Karolina has one unread text from Gert. It’s an image with the caption:

*Hey, thought you might want to see this before people start asking.*

It’s the starting order for the Ladies’ Free Skate, and at the very bottom, much to her confusion and horror, Karolina reads:

WD       **NICO MINORU**       USA

Nico’s withdrawn from the competition.

//

It’s cold in Russia.

Not that Nico’s surprised. She’s been here before.

But she misses the feeling of walking in to the rink to cool off from the warm California weather, even this time of year.

Everything here is just… cold.

And so are the girls on the ice.

Nothing like Chase or Molly…

Or Karolina.

Nico rubs her hands together and up and down her arms as she gets ready to take the ice. It’s her official practice ice for the long program. Which means it’s her practicing alongside her biggest competitors, each of them trying to get every element done perfectly before the event tomorrow, each of them not even hiding that they’re all eyeing Nico after her record-setting short program.

The tension out on the ice is palpable, as each of the girls try their best to stand their ground without looking like the poor sport of the group—not moving out of each others’ way until the last possible second and trying to one-up everyone else with every jump and spin attempt. Nico is rushing to get in one last triple lutz attempt before its her turn to skate her program on the session—the only time she’ll get to skate it with music before she steps in front of the judges.

She knows that, on top of that pressure, the press and plenty of spectators are watching this practice session, eager for a glimpse at what might be in store for the ladies’ free skate and who has a shot at qualifying for the Grand Prix Final.

She sets up for the jump once she’s clear of the other competitors. Nico draws her leg back to push her toe into the ice to launch her into the air. But when she takes off, she feels her foot slip from its position.
And it's too late to do anything about it.

Before she knows it, her upper body is rotating, but her foot can’t hold steady. And then her ankle is twisting, sending an immediate shock of pain up her leg.

She falls not a second later, wincing as she hits the ice. She tries to get up as she has a million times before, until another wave of pain runs up her leg, starting at her ankle. She takes a deep breath, biting her lip as she pushes herself up, shifting all of her weight onto the other leg as she stands and works to make her way as quickly as she can on one foot towards the wall. She’s so focused on just getting off the ice without making a scene, hoping that the commentators and skating bloggers somehow haven’t noticed the fall, that it comes as a surprise to her when she reaches the door to exit the ice, and Leslie is standing there along with two rink monitors and the Team USA doctor.

Leslie doesn’t have to say a word for Nico to read the utter disappointment on her face. Leslie wordlessly offers Nico her guards. She has to sit down to properly put them on without causing herself more pain, and Nico watches as Leslie barks commands at the doctor, who’s leading her toward the locker room.

She doesn’t want to know what she’s thinking, but Nico can’t help but wonder anyway as the rink monitors offer to help her walk in the direction Leslie has gone.

Probably what a waste it is for Nico to break Karolina’s world record only for her to go and break her fucking ankle. Probably angry about all the time and effort she’s put into Nico’s training, and for what? Maybe she won’t even get an Olympic spot.

Maybe she can’t.

Maybe her season’s over.

Nico’s head starts spinning at the thought, and she holds tighter to the rink monitors.

The doctor instructs Nico to take off her skates while she prepares the X-ray machine, which she does gingerly. Nico looks in absolute horror at her ankle, which despite the compression of her skate, is still very obviously swollen.

“So is she out of this competition?” Leslie asks.

Nico strongly considers removing the guard from one of her skates and throwing it at Leslie.

“I can’t even fit my ankle in my boot, so I think that’s a yes,” Nico bites back, the pain searing from her toes up through the bottom of her leg.

“I would advise against continuing the competition,” the doctor declares, taking a few exploratory pokes at Nico’s ankle.

Nico inhales sharply and grunts as the doctor pokes and prods before calling for her assistant, who helps Nico back to a makeshift x-ray room they’ve set up. Nico remains as still as possible throughout the process, begging to any higher being out there that her ankle isn’t broken or seriously sprained.

She silently limps back out to where Leslie and the rink monitors wait, one of them offering her a pair of crutches.

“And how do you feel, Nico?” Leslie asks, and Nico hates that she almost feels that there’s a right or wrong answer to this.
But she’s in so much pain.

“We have 24 hours. Even if the swelling goes down, there’s no way I could do my jumps.”

Leslie purses her lips and nods, taking a seat at the end of the bench Nico sits on, not saying another word.

Nico waits with bated breath for the doctors to return with her x-rays, desperately trying to distract herself from worst case scenarios. She can’t help but wonder what Karolina, always sunshine personified somehow, would handle this.

*Look on the bright side, Nico! More time to choreograph your program. I bet my mom will let you do it now that you have more time on your hands!*

Nico can hear the words in Karolina’s voice, and really, that would be a decent scenario.

As long as there’s a competition for her to debut said program at.

“Well, nothing’s broken,” the doctor announces as returns, studying the x-rays in her hands.

“Well, it feels like it is,” Nico mumbles, though she can’t ignore the feeling of relief that washes over her.

“Consider yourself lucky. It’s a grade I sprain.”

“So what does this mean for competing?” Leslie immediately asks.

“It’s going to take about two weeks to heal. Maybe three.”

Leslie lets out a dramatic sigh, and Nico knows she’s already doing the math in her head—she’s out of the Grand Prix Final, of course, and her next competition will be Nationals, which is six weeks away. It’ll probably be two weeks before Nico can get back on the ice, three or four before she can really hit her jumps hard. All while learning a new program.

It’s going to be a busy six weeks.

“I’m sorry,” Nico offers, though she’s not quite sure why. She knows she shouldn’t have to be sorry.

“No need. We’ll get you back to Gibborum and get you onto a physical therapy regimen immediately.”

The doctor nods and adds, “Obviously make a plan with your doctors back home, but I would say wait at least one week before returning to even simple off-ice training.”

“Very well.”

The doctor instructs Nico to use the crutches for the next week, keep the ankle elevated and iced, and rest as much as possible, before she leaves the room to go retrieve an ankle brace for her.

“I can have our flights changed so we can leave tonight,” Leslie tells Nico, and she appears to already be on her phone making arrangements.

“Sure,” is all Nico says, shrugging, her head swimming and her anxiety spiking at the thought of all she’ll have to accomplish in the next few weeks.

She wonders if Leslie will just want to scrap her new program altogether.
The doctor returns with a brace, and then Nico is adjusting to her crutches as she tries her best to keep up with Leslie.

It’s a silent ride back to the hotel.

Nico is finally back in her room (by herself this time, thank goodness), drops the crutches with a little more force than necessary, and flops onto the bed, finally seeing all the messages she’s missed.

It’s early evening in Moscow, which means it’s morning back home, and in the couple hours that have passed since the incident, she’s sure it’s all over the Internet by now.

Nico sighs, seeing texts from Chase, Molly, and Gert. As well as several other skaters. None from her parents yet. None from Janet.

She starts scrolling through.

CHASE STEIN
nico, are you okay? we’re all worried sick about you.

MOLLY HERNANDEZ
heard you withdrew! hope you’re okay. please let us know what’s going on.

GERT YORKES
you better text one of us back before we get on a plane to russia ourselves.

And three more texts from Karolina.

KAROLINA DEAN
nico, are you okay?

KAROLINA DEAN
are you hurt? what’s going on?

KAROLINA DEAN
we’re all just worried about you.

Nico can’t help but smile at imagining Karolina worrying way too much, and quite frankly, is surprised she only has three texts from her and not more.
Nico texts Karolina back first.

*NICO MINORU*

*i’m not hurt. i promise.*

It’s a lie, but Nico says it partially to comfort Karolina and partially to convince herself. In the grand scheme of things, she’s really not hurt that badly. She’ll go to Nationals, and everything will be fine.

Nico doesn’t have time for her thoughts to spiral down the path of how she’ll never skate again and her career is over and her parents will be even more disappointed in her than they already are and—

She doesn’t have time for that. Because her phone pings again, and Karolina’s name pops up.

*KAROLINA DEAN*

*i know for a fact that’s a lie. my mom just told my dad you’re flying back tonight because you sprained your ankle.*

Nico rolls her eyes because of course Leslie did that. She’s not even sure if the extent of her injury is public, or if all anyone knows is that she’s withdrawn from the rest of the event. She can’t bother to bring herself to look right now.

*NICO MINORU*

*it’s not that bad. just means gpf is a no for me.*

Karolina responds almost immediately.

*KAROLINA DEAN*

*is it weird if i ask if we can facetime if you have wifi?*

It’s weird, this new dynamic that the two have formed. But right now, as she sits on her bed with pillows stacked underneath her ankle, alone and wanting to so badly to let her mind play through all the worst case scenarios, Karolina’s friendship is so welcomed. Nico tries not to think too hard about how weird it is that suddenly Karolina is the one she wants to be talking to.

Nico is about to tell her, yes, go ahead and call, when she hears a knocking at her door, which is surely Leslie coming to update her on their trip home.
NICO MINORU
not weird. but unfortunately
your mother is knocking on
my hotel room door.

Nico sighs and carefully flips over on the bed, leaning down to grab her crutches where she had
discarded them earlier. She balances on her left foot and gets herself situated, careful to avoid putting
any weight on the right ankle.

Nico’s phone buzzes on the bed, and she takes a quick look back at it.

KAROLINA DEAN
of course. talk to you soon.

Nico opens the door for Leslie, who strides past her and into the room, handing her a print-out of
their updated flight information.

“Our flight leaves at 10:40 tonight. When we get back, I won’t expect you to be at the rink for a few
days, but I want you to spend that time thinking of choreography for the new piece."

Nico tries not to appear too excited at that, that Leslie doesn’t want to scrap the new program for
time’s sake. That Nico actually gets a say in it now.

“You’re going to let me choreograph it? Because I—"

But Leslie cuts her off before she can tell her any of her ideas.

“Now that you have some unexpected free time, I will allow your input. But expect me to take the
ideas and make them better.”

Nico just turns away and rolls her eyes at that. Because she knows that really, Leslie doesn’t expect
her to know much about choreography.

And Nico really wants to prove her wrong.

“We will also set up a PT schedule for you. Once you are able to return to off-ice activities, Frances
and Aura will take care of that. I need to focus my time on my other skaters.”

Nico clenches her jaw, frustrated. She’s not surprised that Leslie would just pass her off the second
she gets hurt, that this is a perfect excuse to spend more time working Karolina’s programs rather
than deal with an injured skater, but it hurts.

Being passed off by somebody.

Again.

“In the meantime, I hope that you will continue to not be a distraction to Karolina.”
Leslie gives her a serious look, one that says that she means what she’s saying.

Nico smiles sweetly, fakely.

Because she knows that neither of them have any intention of listening to Leslie’s rule.

“Of course, Coach.”

Chapter End Notes

OH SHIT, DRAMA. also omg karolina just give in to having a crush on nico.

smash that kudos if you've ever injured your ankle and its never been the same since because big mood.
Chapter Summary

now is not the fucking time, tina. nico keeps karolina up all night. leslie is being especially leslie. chase is the only straight white boy we trust. karolina is so fucking gay.

Chapter Notes

you can pry my chase/karolina brotp from my cold dead hands.

wanna give a big shoutout to everyone who read, kudos-ed, and commented last chapter. it still blows my mind how much people enjoy this fic and we are so grateful for all of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The screen on her television asks if she wants to keep watching her binge of Great British Bake Off. Nico sighs and hits the ‘OK’ button, ignoring the fact that she hasn’t moved in the past six hours.

It’s not like there’s much she can do anyway.

It’s been five days since Nico sprained her ankle. In that time she’s been holed up in her apartment, she’s rewatched one season of Parks and Reaction, caught up on Brooklyn Nine Nine, and has slept more than she has since the age of 10.

She’d love it if she wasn’t missing being at the rink so much.

It’s lonely, and this time it isn’t her self-imposed broodiness that’s keeping her alone. It’s the fact that she has literally been medically ordered to rest. She has physical therapy appointments throughout the day, but aside from that, she’s by herself.

It sucks.

She’s gotten texts from Molly, sending her funny memes to cheer her up, from Chase, asking if she’s doing okay and if she needs him to stop by and bring her anything. Gert has been sending her general updates about the daily goings-on at the rink, and she’s even heard from Karolina a few times, who’s in France for her second Grand Prix assignment.

But nothing from Leslie.

She’s not surprised—she’s focusing her efforts on Karolina’s competition, and she probably thinks Nico’s chances at Nationals are less than fantastic now.

Doesn’t mean it hurts any less.
Nico’s tried to keep her head occupied somehow, and her friends have come to visit her. But she hasn’t decided yet if knowing everything that’s going on without her at Gibb is making things better or worse.

The feeling that everyone is going to move on, that life at the rink will keep moving without her and by the time she’s back in two days, there won’t be a place for her anymore, has started to creep in.

She knows rationally that’s ridiculous. She’s been gone for a week.

But skating has been Nico’s life 24/7 for years. She’s barely ever missed a day.

Now all she has is Netflix and her thoughts.

It’s then that she hears a knock on the door and, confused, Nico reaches for her crutches and hobbles over. She can’t quite get herself enough leverage to balance on her tiptoes on one foot to peer through the peephole, so she sighs and hopes for the best.

In this case, she does not get the best.

“Mom?”

She says it in utter shock, because Tina Minoru is standing before her, as cold and professional as she remembers.

Nico hasn’t seen her since she left two months ago.

She hasn’t heard from her either.

“Nico,” is all she gives in response.

“What are you doing here?”

Tina barely waits for Nico to step aside and allow her in before she’s crossing the threshold into Nico’s apartment.

“I heard about your injury and wanted to come check on you.”

“You couldn’t have just called?”

“You couldn’t have just called?”

Nico white-knuckles the hand-holds on her crutches, trying to even out her breathing. No. She couldn’t have called. She doesn’t want to know what’s going on with them and Janet and their whole fucked-up situation.

She doesn’t know why her mother is here now, hates that it’s just like her to show up unannounced. Like some sort of power move.

Suddenly, being alone once again sounds a lot more appealing.

“I also saw that you set a new world record,” Tina comments, taking a seat on one of the chairs at the counter.

“I did do that. Unfortunately did not get to finish the competition.”

“Yes. I’m sorry to hear that,” she replies, eyes wandering down to the brace encasing Nico’s ankle.
(She doesn’t sound too sorry, Nico thinks.)

Nico shifts in discomfort, hopping around and finally taking a seat further away from Tina at her kitchen table. At a lower height.

Most people wouldn’t notice, but Nico knows that just like everything else Tina does, it’s a subtle power play.

It’s annoying.

And Nico doesn’t even know why she’s here.

“So are you staying in town for awhile or…”

“I got a hotel. I had some business to attend to anyway,” Tina responds casually.

And there it is. The not-so-subtle dig that Nico has been expecting for the last five minutes.

She’s not really here for Nico.

She’s just an afterthought.

And somehow that’s worse than her not showing up at all.

“Of course you did.”

Tina, who’s taken the opportunity to check her phone, whips her head up at Nico’s response.

“What was that?”

Nico used to back down from this. She’s steadily grown bolder over time (especially after Amy), and she’s lonely and mad and anxious and now is not the fucking time, Tina.

(Of course you did. God forbid anyone actually stick around for me.”

“Drop the attitude,” she answers coldly.

Tina doesn’t break eye contact with Nico, and Nico refuses to waver either. Her heart is pounding, and she tries to stop herself from shaking.

But what she really wants to know is why Tina showed up here.

She didn’t have to.

There’s a reason. Nico knows it.

“Why are you here?”

Tina smiles at that, and it throws Nico off.

“Because it concerns me that you’re just out here by yourself skating for Leslie Dean of all people. I thought for sure you’d change your mind and come home by now.”

“Why?”

Nico isn’t surprised that this is where she’s going—her unspoken words are crystal clear to Nico. Without her around, her father has no reason to make amends. Without Nico around, Tina can’t keep
up her charade of having the perfect family.

All she wants is that perfect public image back.

Nico knows this.

That’s how it’s always been.

And Tina needs to maintain the fake semblance of control she’s crafted, especially since Amy.

“What is there for you out here? Besides a skating rink?”

Nico doesn’t even have to think before her brain starts listing.

Chase, Molly, Gert... Karolina...

But Tina takes her silence as an answer enough.

“Nothing. Come home, Nico.”

Nico watches her mother’s face shift to something softer, more nurturing.

She’s not falling for it.

“We can try and be a family again.”

There it is.

“Have you even spoken to Dad?”

Tina’s eyes narrow, and she gives Nico the cold, hard glance she’s been on the receiving end of one too many times to keep backing down.

“You’re trying to use me as a bargaining chip, aren’t you?”

“Nico, that is not—"

“I’m not coming home,” Nico answers harshly.

Tina’s eyes widen, only allowing herself to show surprise at Nico’s response before schooling her features back to the flat stare she’s had the whole time.

Nico shakes her head and pushes herself up from the chair and onto her crutches.

She doesn’t want to think about this right now. She doesn’t want to think about much of anything going on in her life right now, but it’s nearly impossible when all she can do is sit.

But Nico definitely doesn’t want to be thinking about her family right now.

It hurts too much.

“I’m sorry, I just... can you leave? I’m not prepared to talk about this when you show up with no warning.”

Tina rises and nods firmly, heading for the door without another word. Nico’s surprised she’s leaving so easily. She turns the knob and turns back to Nico.
“We will discuss this at a later date.”

And then she’s gone again, as quickly as she showed up.

Nico takes her place back on the couch and scrolls through Netflix for thirty minutes to keep herself from crying.

Instead, exhausted and upset, she falls asleep.

She wakes two hours later to see a text from Karolina.

KAROLINA DEAN
how are you holding up?

Nico smiles. Karolina has been checking in on her daily, Nico having expressed to her how frustrating it is and how boring it is to be sitting at home by herself for the most part.

NICO MINORU
i mean my mother showed up, so somehow my ankle is the least of my worries.

It’s not until after Nico sends the message that she panics a bit. Worries that Karolina doesn’t want to hear about her problems, that she’s somehow overshared.

KAROLINA DEAN
oh my. what did she want? is she still with you?

But Nico knows realistically that Karolina is sunlight personified and would probably sit up all night letting Nico vent if she wanted to.

She’s really still not sure why seems to Karolina enjoys their budding friendship. It’s mostly consisted of Nico being grouchy and paranoid.

Nico feels like she really doesn’t deserve her.

NICO MINORU
mostly here on business but wanted to check in i guess.
Nico appreciates that she doesn’t have to further explain for Karolina to understand when she sees her reply.

**KAROLINA DEAN**

i’m sorry nico.

It’s then that Nico wonders what time it is in Grenoble.

It’s 4:43 in the afternoon in Los Angeles.

Which means…

It’s almost 2am in France.

**NICO MINORU**

shouldn’t you be asleep?

Her response is instant.

**KAROLINA DEAN**

having trouble falling asleep.

Nico wonders what that’s about. Then she thinks of how Karolina had wanted to FaceTime her when she was in Moscow.

And then she thinks of how Leslie has reminded her to continue to not be a distraction to Karolina.

Keeping her daughter up all night is probably not on the list of acceptable activities in Leslie’s book.

(Nico wonders if there is a physical rule book. She wouldn’t put it past Leslie.)

It’s that thought that spurs Nico to press the FaceTime button.

Nico stares at her own reflection on the screen for two cycles of the distinct ringing before Karolina picks up.

It’s mostly dark from what Nico can tell, aside from a lamp that Karolina has turned on next to her bed. She’s leaning against a pillow, stray strands of hair sticking out from her braid, and Nico can’t help but be jealous of how Karolina Dean can look so good at two in the morning.

“Hey,” she greets softly, and Nico wonders if Karolina’s hotel room is sharing a wall with Leslie.

“Hey,” she answers, equally soft.

Karolina sits up and adjusts her pillow, then her hair, before settling back against the headboard.
“How’s the ankle?”

Nico presses to flip the camera to show her ankle, now laying raised on a pillow.

“Immobilized and elevated. Don’t worry, Nurse Dean.”

Nico flips the camera back around, and catches Karolina ducking her head and laughing softly before awkwardly giving Nico a thumbs up.

“Why can’t you fall asleep?” she finally asks.

“Nerves,” Karolina answers with a sigh.

“You’re leading by almost ten points,” Nico notes, having caught the highlight’s of yesterday’s short program, Karolina clearly leagues ahead of the competition.

“I know, but my mom’s already on about the Olympics and making sure I don’t peak too early and…”

Karolina trails off, shrugging and focusing on a spot in the room somewhere off-camera.

“She just seems extra intense lately.”

“Probably because she doesn’t give a shit about me anymore with my ankle,” Nico answers without missing a beat.

Nico doesn’t mean for it to come out and immediately regrets it when she sees the frown on Karolina’s face.

She expects Karolina to lecture her.

She doesn’t.

“Hey, that’s not true.”

“Really? Because she’s passed me off to Frances and Aura until further notice.”

Nico knows that Karolina’s relationship with her mother is complicated. And it makes her so mad because all she wants right now is someone to make her feel better about this whole thing. Karolina’s always good at that.

But this involves Leslie.

And despite Karolina’s growing defiance toward Leslie, she knows that Karolina still wants to see the good in her.

Nico gets that. Because part of her still wants to see the good in Tina.

“It’s just a busy time of year. Nationals is next month already and—”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

“Nico.”

Karolina says her name in a warning tone. It’s not malicious. Nico doesn’t think Karolina is upset about what Nico’s saying.
Nico sees it as Karolina hates that this is the way Nico is thinking. That she wants to try to stop the thoughts that she’s not wanted. That she’s worthless without skating. That there’s no way that she can recover in time to do well at Nationals.

Karolina knows Nico well enough to know these are thoughts she’s had.

Nico hates it.

“I’m just tired of being passed off by one person after another.”

Nico whispers it just loud enough for Karolina to hear through her headphones on the other end.

“Is this because of your mom?” Karolina probes carefully.

“And yours.”

Karolina frowns.

“I’m sorry, Nico. I didn’t mean to—"

“It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

(But it sure feels like it right now.)

“You’re going to be okay. You know that, right? It’s just a sprain.”

And she is right, in a sense. Of course Nico will be okay in the long-term.

But she doesn’t have time to be not okay in the short-term.

“That’s so much training time lost.”

She’s been ruminating over it since the injury. All that time she could have to be perfecting her program, making sure her choreography is finished and perfectly memorized in her head. All that time is lost.

“And you can use that time to finish choreographing your new program.”

And she’s right, but that’s still two weeks of on-ice preparation gone.

And Leslie probably doesn’t care about the program anymore anyway.

So Nico laughs and replies, “Yeah, well, I think Leslie will probably scrap any ideas I have.”

Karolina looks nervous on the other end, opening her mouth to say something and then closing it again. She fixates her gaze on another point off-camera.

“Actually, I was kind of hoping you’d be open to ideas.”

“What, from you?

“Um, yeah. I was just thinking about it… the other day. Just for a little bit. And I thought maybe I’d run them by you?”

Oh.

Yeah, having Karolina help her with her choreography is definitely not on Leslie’s list of approved
Karolina-related activities.

But Nico kind of loves that Karolina still doesn’t seem to care.

“Yeah, we can talk about it when you get back,” Nico answers with a smile.

“Deal,” Karolina says, nodding.

“Deal.”

Nico nods along with her, looking at the clock that now reads 5:10pm. It’s after 2am in France. When Karolina speaks again, Nico expects her to end the call.

“I mean it, though. You’re not the kind to stay down for long when you’re knocked down.”

Nico shakes her head. Partially because she doesn’t think its true. And partially because Nico hates how Karolina can so easily pull her apart and get her to open up.

It’s not fair. Nico’s built her walls around Karolina for years, and the past couple weeks, Nico feels like putty in the girl’s hand. She’s so easy to talk to. Too easy.

Nico can barely remember why they hated being around each other for so long.

“That seems not true at all, but… okay, I guess.”

“You had every right to take this season off after what happened with your dad and Janet. Or quit the sport altogether. And instead you moved cross-country to keep chasing what you wanted. To do what was best for you. That’s brave. That’s resilience, Nico.”

She actually has to fight back tears and prays that Karolina can’t see her eyes getting glossy from her screen halfway around the world.

Nico deflects.

“Yeah, and so is stuffing your emotions for the past two years without a proper outlet or coping skills. Really healthy.”

“You’re not putting up your walls right now,” Karolina responds immediately.

She’s right, Nico thinks. And she can’t even bring herself to care. Because for some reason, Karolina Dean keeps her eyes on Nico and is staring at her like hung the moon and stars.

Nico isn’t sure what exactly she did to earn that look, but she kind of wants to know.

She kind of wants to do it again.

And Nico isn’t entirely sure why.

They both pause for a few more seconds, caught in some sort of weirdly charged feeling that Nico can’t quite put her finger on, before Karolina clears her throat and looks down.

“Oh, I should, uh… go. It is late here. But thank you for calling.”

Nico lets out a breath she hasn’t realized she’s been holding and mimics clearing her throat as well.

“Yeah, of course. Sorry I made it so much about me.”
“No, no… I didn’t feel that way at all.”

Karolina smiles softly.

“I’m glad you feel like you can tell me these things, you know?”

“Yeah.”

(Nico is too.)

“Good night. Or afternoon, I guess.”

“Good night, Karolina.”

//

As the announcer calls her name, Karolina skates from her mother at the boards towards the center of the ice, arms raised in greeting to the roar of the crowd. She stops, her gaze focused downward as she gets into position. She takes a deep breath as her music starts, listening to the first few notes before she moves with the introduction of the soft sounds of a piano.

Her eyes follow her hands as she moves, forgetting about the stadium full of people, the judges, and her mother as she falls into the gentle rhythm of the music. Her legs begin to move, carrying her across the ice without her really even having to think about it. She exhales as she briefly steps forward, steadying herself before she launches into her first triple-triple combination jump.

Karolina lands almost effortlessly, earning her another round of applause. She doesn’t miss a beat as she starts back up with her choreography, her body reacting to each note that plays. Her double axel quickly follows, the easiest of her jumps for the program, and then she’s on her way again, her eyes meeting the judging panel as she passes them, every muscle in her body committed to this music, to this story she is telling on the ice.

Karolina backs into one of the corners of the rink, and even she is a bit surprised as she feels the height of her triple lutz. She doesn’t let it show though, and after a strong landing, she’s contorting her body from one difficult position to the next as she spins on her blade. The music slows, and she begins twisting and turning one way and then the other. She never misses a beat as she completes her step sequence, using every moment as a chance to perform to her fullest.

Then she’s jumping again, launching into yet another triple jump. Karolina lands as more instruments join into the music, and her speed increases. Next, she’s on to a three jump combination, and she lands it effortlessly despite now being more than halfway through her routine. Her movements grow sharper as she continues through her jumps and spins, all the while aware of her body warning her of its growing fatigue. Karolina takes care to hold each position, even as she begins to feel her muscles straining from the mix of adrenaline and effort, knowing that she can’t leave any points behind.

Karolina exits the spin and then starts flying across the ice. She stretches her body into a beautiful spiral and then another. She knows she’s almost made it now, and she lets herself take in the massive arena filled with people surrounding her. Almost without warning, she launches into her final jump, landing right in time with the crescendo of the music. The crowd applauds loudly, and she can’t help but smile, feeling the relief of knowing she’s landed all her jumps.
With a final flourish, Karolina enters into a spin, the last element of the program. She stretches her leg above her head, feeling the tension as she arches her back and the speed of her rotation quickens. In time with the final note, she exits her spin and hits her ending position. She lets herself celebrate for a moment, her face stretching into a huge smile as she fills with excitement and relief. She takes a breath and looks out to the crowd, spying American flags and signs with her name dotting the stadium. Karolina recomposes herself and then turns to face the judges, her body extending and then folding as she curtsies proudly.

Karolina is the final skater, and when her scores come in, Leslie plays the part of the doting mother, hugging and kissing her daughter proudly as it’s revealed that she’s won.

And that, most likely, Karolina will now be headed to the Grand Prix Final as the favorite to win.

She goes through the motions—the waiting, the medal ceremony, the posing for pictures. And while Karolina can tell that this is all second nature for Leslie by now, she never lets herself see this as the norm.

Karolina never wants to lose her sense of wonder when she sees kids in the audience tossing stuffed animals and flowers toward her, when they hold their signs of encouragement up for her especially high, hoping that she’ll see.

Figure skating is brutal. She knows that.

But these moments really make it all worthwhile.

She enjoys the busyness of the next 24 hours, skating in the exhibition gala to her program to the song “Past Lives” before boarding a plane home to Los Angeles later that afternoon.

It’s then that Leslie’s motherly persona turns off again.

“I must say, I’d much rather have clean triples and musicality on my side going into Nationals than pre-rotated triple axels and lack of emotion.”

Karolina bristles immediately, staring hard out the plane window as they pass over the endless stretch of ocean.

“So what, Nico will start training on ice again next week, and you’ll just ignore her?”

Leslie smirks as she types away on her laptop.

“Of course not. I want to put my best foot forward with all my students. If I can have two Olympic spots, I’ll take them. I’m just glad Nico’s not my only chance.”

Karolina notes the way that Leslie words that, with all her I and my statements, like she’s the one out on the ice doing the work.

Karolina just shakes her head and wonders if there’s more truth to Nico’s fears than she’s given her credit for.

And she hates it. Nico doesn’t deserve it.

Karolina is that much more determined to help Nico with her program.

She ignores Leslie, repositions herself in the uncomfortable seat, and dozes off.
A few days after her return, Karolina finds herself pacing Gibborum.

She has about a week and a half until the Grand Prix Final.

Naturally, she’s fixating all of her nerves onto something else entirely.

Karolina has been thinking almost non-stop about her conversation with Gert before she left. Coming out feels like the one thing she can control right now.

Something that’s hers and hers alone. That she gets to choose to share.

Something that her mother isn’t involved in. Nico has returned to off-ice training, and though Karolina hasn’t gotten the chance to see her yet, she knows that Leslie isn’t making much of an effort to check in with Nico.

And it’s frustrating.

It’s so frustrating to keep waking up every day and finding new reasons to support that Leslie isn’t the perfect person Karolina made her out to be at a young age.

Karolina wonders if she’s ignored it for so long because once she saw it, she could never go back.

But that’s not something she wants to think about.

Instead, she’s looking for Chase.

She paces back and forth outside the rink, watching casually from the viewing area, trying to see if Leslie is wrapping up her time with him and Molly.

When she sees her mother finally let them go, Karolina charges through the doors and into the rink before she can stop herself.

“Hey!” she calls out as he comes off the ice and begins removing his skates, and Leslie begins a session with another student.

“Hey, how are you?”

Things have calmed between the two of them, the initial awkward feelings fading. Karolina still can’t help but feel a little guilty around him, feels like she somehow led him on (even though Gert had plenty to say in opposition to that). But she knows that above all else, Chase is one of her closest friends and cares about her deeply.

He’s also one of the most kind and compassionate people she knows.

Which is what makes Karolina ultimately decide that he’s another safe choice to tell.

“Good. Good. I was actually wondering if I could talk to you for a minute?”

She’s frenetic in her movements, talking too fast and all but bouncing off the walls. Chase doesn’t let it go unnoticed.

“Yeah, of course. Everything okay?”
He looks concerned, and Karolina is quick to respond.

“Yeah, fine. I promise.”

He catches Karolina watching Leslie, making sure that she’s not looking or somehow able to overhear them.

“I take it you want to go somewhere your mother isn’t?”

Karolina nods frantically and holds up a key that Gert had given her yesterday when she told Gert that she wanted to come out to Chase.

“Yeah, I’ve got a place. Come on.”

He cocks his head to the side and scrunches his face in confusion.

“Kar, you’re not gonna murder me, are you?”

She knows it’s a joke, but she’s so anxious.

“No, I just—"

Karolina fiddles with the storage room key in her hand nervously, finally sighing and motioning for Chase to follow her. He follows wordlessly until they reach the room, and she ushers him inside once checking that no one else is around to see them.

“You’re one of my best friends, Chase. And I want to tell you something.”

He still looks confused, Karolina notes. But it’s Chase, and he does his best to put on a comforting face.

“Okay.”

Karolina keeps pacing as Chase leans against a discarded table.

“I guess I should really thank you, in a sense, because had you not asked me out, I’m not sure I would have confronted this as soon as—"

“Is this part really necessary backstory?”

She stops and sees Chase blushing, clearly embarrassed and wishing that neither of them would ever bring this up again.

But Karolina also knows this is her story to tell.

Gert taught her that.

“Yes, it is.”

He nods in understanding, seems to trust in Karolina’s discretion.

“Fine. Continue,” he says, waving an arm toward her.

Karolina nods and starts pacing again.

She keeps feeling like there needs to be some sort of build-up, some sort of production about the whole thing. Like it’s far too much to just announce to Chase that she’s a lesbian. Like she has to ease
him into it or something.

It makes Karolina’s stomach drop when she thinks of how that’s exactly what she’s doing right now.

*You can’t censor your existence for the comfort of a cishet white man,* she thinks Gert would say.

“I just…I’ve…ignored this about myself for long.”

*Just say it. Just say it. Just say it.*

“I’m gay, Chase.”

He doesn’t look surprised. He doesn’t look hurt. He doesn’t even look confused. He doesn’t look anything other than happy. A soft smile crosses his face, and Chase opens his arms to hug Karolina.

(She remembers then that they’re both friends with Gert, and there’s no doubt she’s had a similar conversation with Chase.)

Karolina’s not sure why, but the simple action of him offering her a hug, her falling into his arms as he holds onto her tightly, causes Karolina to burst into tears.

She can’t even remember the last time she let herself cry.

“Shh, you’re okay.”

Her breathing is jagged as she wills herself to stop, but it’s out of her control. The tears are pouring out of her eyes, and Karolina can’t stop.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she mumbles again Chase’s tear-soaked shirt. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

Chase hangs on to Karolina tighter, and instead of continuing to apologize, Karolina submits and lets the tears feel like catharsis.

“That’s a lot to be holding in,” Chase says.

He loosens his grip on Karolina and allows her to pull back. She wipes her eyes, and stray tears continue to fall as she evens her breathing out.

“Have you told anyone else?”

“Gert. She was the one who suggested I tell you next.”

Chase smiles fondly, nodding in understand because *of course Gert would.*

“Thank you for trusting me.”

Karolina pulls Chase back in and hugs him again, letting out another deep breath.

“You know, suddenly Gert’s rant about how people should properly handle people coming out to them from a few days ago seems planned,” Chase comments.

Karolina pulls back, and they both laugh. She stays quiet for a few moments longer.

“I don’t know how I’m going to tell my parents. My mom’s going to be so mad.”

It’s something she’s barely let herself think about. It’s something that’s been easy to ignore in the
middle of the Grand Prix season, when all she’s thinking about is skating.

But right now, in this short moment of reprieve from that, Karolina lets herself say out loud something she’s barely wanted to admit to herself.

“You think so?”

“I don’t know, honestly. I think that’s the scariest part. I’ve started to play through just about every scenario imaginable in my head, and I don’t know what’s going to happen. And then let’s say the worst does happen. What do you do with that? My mom’s never been a shining example of healthy parenting, but how do you even begin to process that? She’s still my mom.”

Chase shuts his eyes tightly and grimaces, nodding in understanding.

Karolina knows he understands. Really, most of the Gibborum group would understand. They haven’t exactly won the parenting lottery.

Chase sighs deeply and keeps nodding along.

“I’m still figuring that out myself.”

Karolina thinks about her conversation with Nico from a few days ago, how her mother had showed up without warning. How Nico feels like she’s not only losing her own mother but Leslie as well.

“Nico probably is too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Chase turns to face Karolina, who stands next to him leaning against the table.

“Have you thought about telling Nico? Or anyone else, I guess?”

“I don’t know.”

“Something to think about,” he adds, shrugging. “I know you two have gotten closer lately.”

For some reason, telling Nico feels terrifying right now. Not because she’s afraid of how she’ll react…

Karolina isn’t exactly sure why she can feel her heart rate increase and her anxiety spike when Chase makes the suggestion.

“Yeah, well she’s not too bad once you crack the tough exterior,” she jokes.

“Oh, don’t I know it,” Chase responds, laughing.

Karolina doesn’t say anymore. Thinking about Nico is making her anxious, and she’s not quite sure why.

“I’m glad you two are getting to know each other better now.”

Karolina smiles.

“Me too.”

Chase wraps an arm around Karolina’s shoulders and gives her a squeeze.
“So, any girls in the picture?”

She can tell from Chase’s tone that he’s mostly joking, but Karolina sputters when the first girl that comes to mind is Nico.

It’s just because they were just talking about her. Nothing else.

*Oh god, did Chase say that because he thinks I like Nico?*

Chase pulls her out of her thoughts.

“No, it’s okay, I just—I don’t think I’m ready for that right now.”

He nods in understanding, and Karolina rises and heads for the door before she can embarrass herself any further.

They’re rounding a corner and reaching the counter where Gert is running the reception desk. Karolina chances a look at Chase and sees him staring straight at Gert the entire time they pass by.

“And what about you? Any girls in *your* picture?”

Chase shakes his head like he’s completely in a daze.

“Hmm? What? No. Sorry, I just zoned out there for a minute.”

She gives him a knowing smile and pats his arm.

“Right.”

Later that night, Karolina’s mind keeps wandering to how she thought of Nico when Chase asked her if there are any girls she likes.

She tells herself it’s nothing.

But Karolina again can’t help but feel like she’s ignoring something because once she sees it, she can’t go back.

Chapter End Notes

i’m going to give more out of context summaries more often because i, for one, think it’s hilarious. hit us up on tumblr! @everybodyhatesjroth and @longlivetheheda.
Chapter Summary

we are quickly hurtling toward intense pining territory. nico returns to light training. molly ships everyone. old lace makes a cameo. karolina, you're doing fucking superb you funky little lesbian!

Chapter Notes

lets turn up the gay a couple of notches, you patient bunch.

also! i forgot to share this with you all last time, but fsau has a spotify playlist! search fsau on spotify and follow for your listening pleasure or message me on tumblr for a direct link (idk if there's a way to do that on here lol help).

also peep the reference to Runaways 1x06 embedded in the dialogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nico flexes her ankle back and forth, pleased with the somewhat increased range of motion. She’s finally been able to return to off-ice training, which has mostly just meant a lot of stretching, cardio, and strengthening exercises for her ankle. But today, Frances and Aura have given her the go-ahead to try a few off-ice jumps.

It’s nothing that exciting.

A few single lutzes here. An axel. A double salchow when she finally feels warmed up.

She definitely doesn’t feel back to normal yet, won’t for another week or so, she knows.

But the clock is ticking.

Her ankle still hurts, twinges of pain shooting through her joints when she doesn’t quite land properly. Nico knows that she’s probably pushing herself a little too hard, and if she doesn’t slow down, she’ll just end up back on crutches.

But Nationals is a little less than a month out, and she’s starting to panic.

Molly and Chase walk into the room not too long after Nico takes a seat to take a break and stretch.

“Nico!”

Nico smiles at the girl’s enthusiasm.

“Hi Molly.”

“Hey, good to see you back out here,” Chase says, taking a seat beside Nico and stretching.
“Doing off-ice singles isn’t exactly what I had in mind for prep when Nationals is three and a half weeks away.”

“You’ll be great. I can’t wait to see your new program. Gert told me that Karolina said its great.”

Nico rolls her eyes and smiles.

“Well Karolina should learn to keep her mouth shut.”

Nico says it fondly though, where a few weeks ago she may have had more malice behind it. She wants to keep the new program under wraps as much as possible, but she can’t help but feel a little lighter knowing that Karolina enjoys the unfinished product so much that she can’t help but share it with their friend group.

“It’s not even finished yet,” she adds.

“But it’ll be amazing when it is,” Chase replies as he pushes the bottom of his feet together in a butterfly position with his legs.

“Yeah, maybe Leslie will even acknowledge me if I get on the podium,” Nico mumbles.

Nico finds it interesting how, usually, Leslie would have probably accompanied Chase and Molly into the off-ice room. She tells herself it’s just because she had another lesson. She hopes.

“What, suddenly you miss her being so hard on you?”

She knows Chase means it as a joke, but Nico can’t help but feel ashamed—she’s gone from bitching about Leslie to wishing she would pay more attention to her.

But it’s really not that simple.

It’s the principle of the thing.

That, yet again, Nico feels like she’s being sidelined, pushed aside, because of something out of her control.

And, while Nico knows the easy choice, the old choice, would be to take it out on Karolina, she doesn’t want to do that.

She likes having Karolina around.

Nico kind of misses seeing her every day. She hasn’t seen her since she got back from France.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“You’ll be back out on the ice next week,” Molly adds cheerfully.

Nico nods in understanding, appreciative of Molly’s optimism.

She really hopes the younger girl never grows out of it.

Nico sighs and lays out and stretches her entire body.
“Until then, are you coming to Friendsgiving tonight?” Molly asks.

It’s Gert and Molly’s idea to have proposed a holiday party to their group chat. (Nico isn’t quite sure when she became so involved in their lives to warrant her being added to their group texts, but she isn’t complaining.)

It’ll be perfect timing for when Karolina gets back from France and before the chaos of Nationals prep begins. And we will not be in any way celebrating the genocide of Native Americans, Gert had texted.

Nico can’t remember the last time she felt so included in something.

She doesn’t hate it.

And yet, while she’s been at Gibborum lately, she feels on the fringe.

“Of course. I’ll be there,” Nico responds.

“Good. See you later,” Chase answers as he rises and joins Molly to practice some of their program.

The three continue their practices in comfortable silence, Nico fighting through any pain she feels and taking care not to let Chase or Molly see.

Later that night, she pulls up to the Yorkes house trying to hide a limp.

“Nico’s here, everyone!” Gert announces when she rings the doorbell and Gert comes running.

Dale and Stacey greet her with a hug, which Nico politely returns, before the Yorkes parents sneak out the front door that’s still hanging open, and the group is left to their own devices.

“Nico, have you met Old Lace?”

Molly holds some sort of lizard in her hands, its wide, beady eyes staring at Nico intensely. Nico gives the lizard an awkward wave.

Molly goes to deposit the lizard back in its home, and Chase greets her with a friendly hug. Karolina follows not too far behind with an awkward wave of her own.

“Hey.”

Chase lets Nico go, and Karolina takes his place, tentatively reaching for a hug and trying to negotiate their height difference.

Nico doesn’t mean to compare, but with the juxtaposition of Chase’s slightly too tight arms and hard, muscular body, and Karolina’s gentleness…

Wow, Karolina gives really good hugs.

Nico thinks she could get used to this.

And she smells really good, too.

Hmm.

“Hi,” Nico finally answers when Karolina unwraps her warm arms from Nico.
“I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Well, being the top ranked skater for the Grand Prix Final has kept you busy, while my physical therapy, off-ice training, and Netflix have kept me busy.”

Karolina pouts, and Nico can’t tell if she’s just getting way too soft or what the deal is, because the first word that comes to her mind when she sees the look on Karolina’s face is cute.

It’s weird.

“Next week we can start working on nailing down your choreo.”

It’s then that Molly pops back in unannounced.

“You’re helping Nico with her program? Isn’t that kind of weird since you’re competing against each other?”

Karolina gives Nico a panicked look because she knows that wasn’t meant to be overhead. Neither of them need that information to get back to Leslie.

“Karolina’s just too nice for her own good,” Nico responds with a wink in Karolina’s direction.

Is she blushing?

“Hey—”

Gert cuts Karolina off.

“I think its sweet that you two are able to empower each other rather than submit to being pitted against each other by media who would love to frame your relationship as a rivalry.”

“Thank you, Gert,” Karolina says with pride in her voice.

The five of them mill about, gathering food on their plates—most of which was made by Gert and Chase, Nico discovers—and sitting in the living room talking about anything and everything, only discussing the positive aspects of skating.

There’s no bringing up Leslie’s name, and for that, Nico is grateful.

They’re all laughing about a story Chase just told about his and Nico’s younger days, when the Steins and Minorus thought for sure the two would be pairs partners.

“And then Nico stepped on my foot,” Chase tells.

“With skates on? Didn’t that hurt?”

“Relax, Karolina, it was in off-ice training, and what Chase isn’t telling you is that contrary to popular belief, he did go through an awkward phase and had two left feet.”

“Well, he really didn’t stay in the awkward phase for long,” Gert adds, and then her eyes grow wide, realizing what she’s just said.

Molly’s mouth drops open, but she’s smiling as she looks to Chase, who’s just blushing as he pokes a piece of chicken with his fork.

Karolina changes the subject quickly, sensing Gert’s discomfort, and asks Chase if he has any more
fun stories about him and Nico.

Everybody pretends not to notice when Molly makes a joke, and while he laughs, Chase places a hand on Gert’s knee.

Oh, Nico is definitely asking Chase about this later.

Later on, Nico takes a few plates to the kitchen while the others are engrossed in conversation.

She doesn’t see Karolina follow behind her.

“So Gert and Chase seem to be getting along extra well today,” Karolina mentions as she brings a stack of cups into the kitchen, where the two can watch Chase, Gert, and Molly talking but far enough away not to be heard.

Nico smiles.

“You noticed that too, huh?”

“Kind of hard to miss,” Karolina replies as she takes a place next to Nico at the sink.

“Molly sure seems to be for it,” she adds.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if she has a master plan to bring them together herself. Kid is smarter than all of us.”

“And Gert would be hard-pressed to find someone more protective of Molly.”

They fall into a comfortable rhythm, Nico washing a few dishes, and Karolina taking them to dry. But Nico still feels that same energy from earlier when she first got to the house. When Karolina hugged her.

Like something’s changed now that they’re alone together.

Nico can’t decide if she likes it or not—it’s putting her on edge, but somehow, it feels good knowing Karolina is choosing to be in a kitchen washing dishes with her rather than relaxing with the rest of their friends.

“He’s a great guy,” Nico finally replies, bracing her hands on the sink and watching the three of them, avoiding Karolina’s gaze.

Karolina stops as well, which is not at all what Nico wants, wants Karolina to be focusing on the dishes and not this conversation.

For some reason, knowing that she enjoys having Karolina’s captive attention and actually having it at the exact same time is way too much for Nico.

“We’re all lucky to have him.”

Nico forces herself to think about Chase, who they’re actually talking about, and not Karolina standing so closely next to her.

She can’t help but smile as she sees Molly’s eyes darting back and forth between Gert and Chase with a devious smile the pair don’t seem to notice.

“Oh wow, is Nico Minoru smiling?” Karolina jokes playfully.
“Oh please, you’ve seen me smile before,” Nico answers, paying particularly close attention to a dish towel.

Nico finally chances a look up at Karolina, who’s giving her that same…adoring look—is the only way Nico can think to describe it—that she was giving her the other night over FaceTime.

It’s a lot more intense in person than it is thousands of miles apart over a screen.

“I know, I just… it’s nice to see you happy. I know the past couple weeks haven’t been easy."

Nico laughs awkwardly, looking back down again and wringing and unwringing the towel in her hands repeatedly.

“Feels like the past couple years haven’t been easy,” she deflects.

“Yeah, I get that,” Karolina says with a long sigh, leaning her elbows on the countertop.

“Everything okay with you?”

She looks back up at Karolina, who just shrugs.

“Yeah, it’s just…my mom being my mom. You know how it is.”

Nico knows exactly how it is. But she wonders if Karolina actually understands the full extent of it.

Karolina continues, “Look, I’m sorry if, the other night, I made you feel like your feelings weren’t valid. It’s just… hard sometimes because—"

“She’s still your mom. I know.”

They’ve seemed to have reached a mutual understanding recently—because what do you do when your parents have given you so much but just aren’t good people?

Nico knows that they’re both caught in this purgatory with their own parents (and Nico with Leslie too) and haven’t quite figured it out yet.

She wonders if they ever will.

“I just hate how she’s playing favorites. With me. It makes me so uncomfortable.”

“Look, I know that this is easier said than done because I have trouble believing it myself, but… at the end of the day, neither of us is our parents. Or any of the messed up shit they’re doing.”

Nico has had to remind herself this over and over again for months.

It still hasn’t made it much easier.

She kind of hopes that saying it out loud will.

Karolina nods, seeming to take what Nico has said to heart.

“Yeah. I mean, growing up, you were always the rebellious one, and I was the momma’s girl who never did anything disobedient or different or for myself. And now—"

Nico gently jabs an elbow into Karolina’s arm as she cuts her off.

“And now what? You’re the rebel?”
Karolina flashes an easy smile, chuckling along with Nico.

Nico watches Karolina, who’s now refusing to make eye contact with her. She takes a deep breath and keeps talking.

“And maybe now that I know that I’m not crazy for thinking that she’s not perfect, that I don’t have to accept her manipulating me or deciding who my friends are, maybe I’m free…to be honest about who I really am.”

Karolina finally turns to look at Nico as she finishes her sentence.

If the moment they had just earlier was charged, Nico’s not quite sure what word could possibly describe the look Karolina is giving her now.

Her lips are parted slightly, her eyes are soft…longing, almost—for what, Nico doesn’t have a clue—but she’s giving Nico this look like she’s begging her to pick up on something she hasn’t actually said.

All Nico can think about is how she’s not sure she’s ever stood this close to Karolina, and have her eyes always been this blue?

Nico realizes they’ve been staring at each other in silence for so long that neither notices when Gert and Molly walk in.

“Hi!”

They both jump at the sound of Molly’s voice and turn to see Gert and Molly giving them extremely confused looks.

“Hi!” Karolina replies in a voice much lower than her usual tone.

Nico watches Karolina reach for a cup frantically, but it slips and falls to the ground.

“We were just…trying to help put things away.”

Gert narrows her eyes and looks back and forth between Nico and Karolina.

“Don’t worry about it. We can get it later.”

“Come on,” Molly adds. “We’re trying to decide which game to play.”

Nico doesn’t miss the weird look Molly and Gert give each other before Molly is pulling Nico out of the kitchen and leaving Gert and Karolina behind.

//

Gert shifts her gaze to Karolina, straightening her glasses.

“Karolina, can I talk to you for a second?”

Karolina smiles, tilting her head as she asks, “Yeah, what’s up?”
Karolina does her best to keep her composure, at least while Molly and Nico are still in earshot.

Gert has the two of them stay back as the others start moving out of the kitchen. Once they’re alone, the shorter girl’s smile widens.

“So, I hate to ask you about this again, but…”

Gert’s words pick up speed, coming faster as she finishes off her question excitedly.

“Are you kind of into Nico?”

The question catches Karolina off guard, not because of the content, but how Gert has asked. It’s so abrupt, sudden.

And suddenly Karolina’s not entirely sure how to answer.

Karolina just stands there, mouth agape, still holding the cup she’d dropped in panic when Molly and Gert showed up in the kitchen to find her staring at Nico.

When Karolina doesn’t respond, Gert continues, this time slowing down a bit as she explains herself.

“It’s just when I walked into the room, I kind of sensed a vibe.”

In typical Gert fashion, she continues on before Karolina can respond, and she’s honestly grateful for the purple-haired girl’s ability to hold a conversation all on her own in this moment.

“Like, I know I gave you shit about it, but I want you to know I would totally support it.”

Karolina feels her brain whirling through so many emotions right now, and suddenly she’s thankful for all the media training her mom and US Figure Skating invested in for her, hoping that her calm composure is masking the things she’s feeling. She takes a deep breath, her voice staying quiet as she finally replies.

Because she’s definitely not into Nico.

That’s what she’s been telling herself.

“Look, you and Chase are the only ones who even know I’m a lesbian.”

Karolina hopes that Gert will let her leave it at that, but the look on her face tells her that she’s not quite buying it.

“I’m just saying that… even if… hypothetically, I was into…someone… I don’t think now’s really the best time for that. I mean I’ve still barely told anyone and—”

Before Karolina can continue, Gert chimes in, a warm smile back on her face.

“I can think of someone else in this house besides Nico who looks up to you a lot and would support you.”

For a moment Karolina is completely puzzled, but as it hits her, a soft smile lights up her own face as well as she peers out of the kitchen to look at Molly, who’s holding a conversation with Nico and Chase.

“I don’t want you to feel like I keep telling you what to do,” Gert adds quickly, “but I do know Molly really looks up to you.”
Karolina has been bonding with Molly a lot lately, and she has been thinking about how to tell her for a while now, but with traveling and training, she hasn’t gotten the chance yet.

“Think you can convince her to sneak away for a minute?” she asks, her smile widening as she watches her friend nod excitedly.

Karolina’s glad her smile seems to be hiding how fast her heart is beating, how much her hands are starting to shake.

She’s heard it said that the more people you come out to, the more the closet loses its power.

But especially this early on, she’s terrified still.

She and Gert move out towards where the others are, but Karolina waits back just a bit as Gert reaches the group, bending down at Molly’s side. Karolina looks over from Molly to where Nico is sitting as she hears her laugh. She’s so drawn into watching Nico as she smiles and jokes with Chase and now Gert that she doesn’t even realize Molly is at her side until she hears the girl’s voice.

“Hey, you needed me?”

Karolina snaps her gaze to the younger girl now standing at her side and nods.

“Yeah. Actually… I wanted to tell you something.”

Molly shoots the blonde a confused look.

“Is it good?”

Karolina can’t help but chuckle at the question, so simple and innocent. For just a moment, it makes her reflect on how she views this part of herself, this huge part of her truest self that she’d been so quick to repress for so long. When she was Molly’s age—hell, even a few months ago, the answer would have been a firm no. But now, with a little bit of support, courage, and rebellion in her life, things are kind of different.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Molly still looks just as puzzled, albeit relieved at knowing it at least isn’t bad news she’ll be hearing. Karolina takes a look back at the other members of the group, now completely wrapped up in their own conversation, before turning back towards the door.

“Here, they’ll stay busy for a little bit. Let’s go in by Old Lace.”

They move through the house and find Old Lace splayed across a log in her cage.

“So what did you want to tell me?”

And now the nerves have set in again.

Logically, Karolina knows that there’s literally no reason for Molly to be anything but supportive—she’s been raised by two of the most progressive people she knows.

And her sister is Gert.

This shouldn’t be hard.

Why does this still feel so hard?
“Well, I really care about all of you—Gert, Chase, you, Nico even… and I’ve been dealing with some things on my own lately, and… I think they’d be a little easier without keeping them to myself.”

Molly seems to have a dawn of realization but only nods as Karolina goes on.

“So, you know how Gert is bi, right?”

“Are you bi, too?”

Karolina just smiles. Leave it to Molly to not even miss a beat in this conversation. No shock. No confusion. Just a simple question. She’s known revealing this wouldn’t be a big deal, but it still feels like a weight off her chest knowing that someone else in her world loves and supports her just as much, if not even more, because of this information.

“Not quite. Full on lesbian. It’s still a pretty new thing for me.”

Molly’s eyes get wide with recognition, and Karolina watches as her smile widens.

“So you do have a crush on Nico!” the younger girl exclaims.

Karolina freezes, completely caught off guard.

“I’m sorry?”

Molly continues on, explaining her reasoning to the stunned blonde.

“You two have had a weird vibe with each other since as long as I can remember.”

It takes another second before Karolina recovers, shaking her head as she smiles, meeting Molly’s gaze and gently nudging her with her elbow.

“You are way too perceptive for your age.”

A smug grin crosses Molly’s face as she crosses her arms proudly.

“Thanks! I got it from Gert and Chase.”

Karolina nods, knowing that that’s most certainly the case. There’s a moment of silence, and Karolina thinks the conversation might be over, when Molly starts again.

“So do you like her?”

Karolina bites her bottom lip and lets her eyes follow along as her finger traces along where Old Lace’s cage meets the table.

“I don’t… I don’t know, Molly.”

Karolina shrugs and shakes her head, hoping it will clear her head of all the swirling thoughts. She exhales deeply. Karolina knows she has to take this all one step at a time, and even thinking about being in a relationship—with anyone, would be jumping way down the list.

At least, that’s the excuse she gives herself.

“What matters to me most right now is finding the strength to share this with people I care about and think about telling my parents.”
Molly nods, seemingly appeased by Karolina’s answer. She sees Molly nod and smile supportively, and Karolina responds with a kind smile of her own.

“In the mean time, you keep shipping Gert and Chase. I think they’re finally getting somewhere.”

//

Molly just giggles as Karolina wraps an arm around her shoulders, and they exit the room.

The next evening, Karolina is alone on the ice, drilling her spins to death. As a skater, the body adjusts to the dizziness that anyone else would usually feel.

But after several rounds of sit spins, even Karolina is feeling it. She rises out of the spin and takes a deep breath, gliding around aimlessly on one foot, her left leg tucked around her right as she weaves.

“Room for one more?”

Karolina skids to a stop as she passes the open entrance and exit to the rink to find Nico watching her.

“Nico? What are you doing here?”

Not that she’s not happy to see her.

But Karolina is actually starting to find Nico distracting.

Just maybe not for the reasons Leslie thought she would be.

“Figured you might be here since you fly out tomorrow.”

She smiles and skates over to her, doing her best to do so as coolly as possible.

Karolina ends up nearly tripping over herself, which earns a smirk from Nico.

“Came to wish me luck?” Karolina asks, completely ignoring the fact that her face just almost fell right into Nico’s.

“Came to join you,” Nico replies, holding up her skates.

Karolina’s mouth drops open, and while she’d love to say yes, she also knows that Nico isn’t supposed to be skating yet.

“You’re not cleared to be back on the ice.”

“I will be in two days.”

“Which is two days from now.”

Nico cocks her eyebrow in a way that makes Karolina think that maybe she can be convinced.


And as much as she wants to give in, Karolina would rather have a grumpy Nico today than an even
grumpier Nico watching Nationals on crutches.

“Seriously, Nico. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“Come on, I only have a couple more days until I can skate again,” she pleads. “And you need to teach me choreo. At least do it before you leave.”

She does have a point. And Nico does need to start working on her program while Karolina is in Japan.

And, at this point, how can she say no to spending more time with Nico?

Karolina rolls her eyes and answers, “Put on your skates and let’s see how your ankle feels.”

Karolina isn’t sure she’s ever seen Nico as excited as when she sits down on the bleachers and starts removing her shoes. Nico ties her skates with a well-practiced quickness and stands up, seemingly unfazed by her ankle.

“How are you feeling?”

“Great.”

“You wouldn’t tell me the truth if it hurt anyway, would you?”

Nico raises a finger to her lips and winks.

“Shhhh.”

Karolina laughs nervously because Nico has now winked at her twice in the past 24, and Karolina isn’t entirely sure what to make of that.

“Can you even walk in them?”

“You think they haven’t had me do this shit in PT?”

Nico walks a line back and forth easily, even balancing on each foot for a few seconds.

“Nico, just please be careful.”

Karolina knows that Nico knows her body best, but she also knows that Nico can be reckless at times.

“You really want to explain to my mom how you got hurt? And that you were with me?”

Nico only smirks at that.

“I would love to see the look on her face—"

“Nico.”

Nico finally stands evenly on both feet and sighs.

“Fine.”

But Karolina has an idea, and she steps back out onto the ice and holds out a hand for Nico.

“Here.”
“What are you doing?”
“You wanted to get out here right?”
“This isn’t my first time at Learn to Skate.”
“This is a compromise. If you want to get out here, you have to let me hold onto you.”
Karolina then realizes she hasn’t quite thought this through and isn’t sure how well she’ll be able to concentrate with Nico’s hand in hers.
“At least for the first few laps,” she amends.
Nico gives Karolina her hand and steps onto the ice for the first time since her injury.
She hasn’t lost a step at all and starts being the one to pull Karolina along after half a lap. Karolina tugs on Nico’s hand to pull her closer.
Because she’s supposed to making sure Nico doesn’t fall.
That’s the only reason, she tells herself.
Karolina tries not to think too hard about the weight of Nico’s hand in hers and the coldness that hits her palm when Nico lets go after a few laps around.
“I told you I’m fine. Can you show me what you had in mind?”
Karolina is still focusing on the empty feeling in her hand when Nico speaks.
“Oh, yeah. So elements-wise I think you’ve got it down, right? It’s more just transitions and tying it all together?”
“Pretty much. It’s just… it’s so personal, and I want to make it authentic, you know? Rather than just faking a program that’s been entirely done for me.”
Karolina has always had her own particular process for connecting with the music. It’s nothing that anyone taught her—not Leslie, not any other coaches or choreographers—just a ritual she’s had from a young age, probably 13, sitting in her room trying to figure out how to perform more, perform better.
“Do you trust me?” Karolina asks.
“What?”
“Trust me,” Karolina says, this time a statement.
Nico stares directly into her eyes for a moment, like she’s trying to see what’s going on inside her head, like she’s having trouble trusting Karolina.
Karolina can’t even really blame Nico, knowing her history, even over something as simple as this.
Karolina makes a conscious effort to keep her breathing even as Nico continues to watch her.
“Okay.”
Karolina’s hands start to shake as she holds them out for Nico.
“Take my hands.”

Nico looks utterly confused, and Karolina suddenly starts worrying that Nico’s figured out that in the back of her mind, Karolina is partially doing this because she just wants to keep holding Nico’s hand.

Which she’s totally not, by the way.

Still, Nico takes her hands anyway.

“What are you doing?”

“Close your eyes,” is all Karolina gives her in response, her voice barely above a whisper.

Karolina has to pause, not trusting her voice to be steady at all, as Nico lets her eyes fall shut.

The intimacy of it all is throwing Karolina off. She’s frustrated. This was her idea to begin with.

“Take a few deep breaths,” Karolina whispers, and she’s not quite sure if she’s telling Nico or herself.

“This better not be the choreo you came up with,” Nico mumbles, eyes still closed.

Karolina lets out a breathy laugh and wills her hands to stay still as Nico loosely holds them.

“Just trust me.”

Karolina takes a deep breath, emphasizing the sound and motion so Nico can sync up with her.

Despite slowing her breathing, Karolina’s heart keeps beating faster.

“Think about the song. Think about the message you’re trying to get across.”

“That the last few years of my life have sucked, and I’m putting my parents on blast?”

“Nico.”

She wonders if Nico can feel it too, this electricity that Karolina’s been feeling the last few times they’ve spoken.

Like last night in the Yorkes’ kitchen when she looked at Nico and suddenly felt like she was falling.

Everything is bubbling up inside her at once as she stands here with Nico, and fuck, it feels like something she’s been ignoring for as long as she can remember. That maybe she’s always felt this drawn to Nico. Maybe she’s always been able to hide it because she’s been conditioned to be her rival. Nothing else.

“It’s like…this weird sense of longing? For the person I used to be. But at the same time accepting that so much has changed, and that, as much as I wish I could go back and tell a younger me a few things, I have to almost…get used to this new person I’m becoming. I don’t know. If that makes any sense.”

Karolina feels like she’s falling again.

“Yeah. It does,” Karolina whispers.
“It’s like I’m looking back on who I was and what I’ve gone through fondly but still so frustrated.”

Frustrated. That’s how Karolina feels too. Like, god, she’s wasted so much time finding reasons to not like Nico, to think she’s broody and unfeeling and aloof.

Nico opens her eyes.

“And I don’t really know where to go from here.”

Karolina isn’t sure where they go from here either.

She takes a few moments to compose herself again, because Nico is looking at her again, and Karolina doesn’t know when her entire body suddenly decided that Nico even looking at her is much too intense.

Karolina drops Nico’s hands before she does something stupid.

“I meant what I said, you know. You’re resilient, Nico. More than you give yourself credit for.”

Nico laughs awkwardly and shakes her head, clearly not believing what Karolina is telling her.

“Yeah. Okay. So what was the point of that?”

“To get you in the right headspace.”

“So are you going to actually show me choreography now, or keep making me talk about my feelings?”

Karolina nods, and this time its Nico who expectantly reaches out a hand for her. Nico smirks as she takes her hand, and its that small act that’s enough for Karolina to finally stop fighting it.

Molly and Gert are absolutely right.

Karolina is definitely into Nico.

Chapter End Notes

things are about to get really fucking gay.
Chapter Summary

7286 words later, here you go. Karolina goes to the Grand Prix Final and has a Commander Lexa moment. Gert and Chase are definitely more than friends. Nico and Karolina are gay getting gayer. Nico and Chase have a heart-to-heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her legs feel heavy. Her blades must be dull—she isn’t moving quite the way she usually does. Karolina can’t help but panic as she’s about to set up for a triple lutz, taking an unusually long time to do so, completely ignoring any flair of emotion and movement that usually comes so naturally for her. She sticks her toe pick in the ice like she has thousands of times before, flies into the air…

And falls.

The crowd gasps as she rises slowly, her legs feeling even heavier than before. She keeps skating but she feels like she’s getting slower and slower, like no amount of crossovers can help her pick up speed. She jumps into a triple salchow and comes down hard on her arm.

She freezes.

She can’t get up.

Leslie is screaming at her from the boards.

Get up. Get up. Get up.

But when she gets up, she can’t balance. Karolina just keeps falling down and—

Karolina nearly jumps out of her bed and gulps a large breath of air as she sits up.

It was just a dream.

Karolina looks around the room, searching for her phone.

3:07am.

She feels like she’ll never fall back asleep.

She’s been in Japan for three days, preparing for the Grand Prix Final. The short program is tomorrow (well, later today now, she reminds herself).

Karolina hasn’t slept well since she got here. She wants to blame it on jet lag, but she’s gotten somewhat accustomed to having her sleep schedule change during the season due to travel. She should be used to this.
She’s not.

And she’d placed third at the Junior Grand Prix Final last year, won Junior Worlds, but that pressure doesn’t compare at all to what she’s feeling right now.

Everything else she’s experienced as a skater pales in comparison to every single competition this season.

Because two and a half months from now, she’ll either be at the Olympics or she’ll be at home, Leslie guilting her the entire time. (Probably not even talking to her.)

Karolina finds herself wishing she could call someone right now, call one of her friends to try and talk her down.

It’s 3am in Nagoya, which means it’s just after 10am back home.

Chase and Molly are probably on the ice. Gert is probably working. And Nico…

Well, Karolina can’t quite find an excuse not to talk to Nico.

Even though she kind of wishes she could.

Karolina left for the competition the morning after she and Nico had skated together, and they haven’t spoken since. But Karolina chalks that up to the fact that both of them are extremely focused right now—Nico is able to return to her on-ice training, and Karolina has the Grand Prix Final to worry about.

But she can’t help but worry about their next conversation because she doesn’t exactly know where to go from here.

Karolina is terrified, truly.

She likes Nico.

A lot.

Probably too much for this to end well, she thinks.

And for the past three days, Karolina feels like something has broken open inside of her after finally admitting to herself what apparently other people could see so much better than her. Karolina has put everything she can into not thinking about Nico—she needs to focus.

And now, she’s terrified to let on in any way that she’s gay because what if it scares Nico away for some reason? What if she does the wrong thing? Stares too long? Smiles too hard at her?

Nico probably doesn’t like her back anyway.

But then she thinks back to them standing in the kitchen at the Yorkes house, that weird energy in the room when they were alone. The way Nico was looking at Karolina with just as much intensity as Karolina was looking at her. Their new habit of talking at odd hours when the other is gone.

And Karolina can’t help but be just the slightest bit hopeful.

Just thinking about it again, the look on Nico’s face when Karolina was staring at her in the kitchen, begging to pick up on the subtle statement she was making, is enough to give Karolina an adrenaline rush.
And that rush and a combination of bad sleep gives her enough of a push to stop thinking so hard and text Nico.

**KAROLINA DEAN**

any chance you’re free?

Karolina’s heart starts pounding wildly after she presses send, realizing she’s made a terrible mistake.

A response comes shortly thereafter, sending Karolina’s stomach into knots.

**NICO MINORU**

isn’t it like 3am in nagoya?

(She tries not to think too hard about how well Nico knows the time difference. She probably just searched it on Google just now.)

**KAROLINA DEAN**

just woke up and can’t fall back asleep.

**NICO MINORU**

everything ok?

**KAROLINA DEAN**

nightmares.

**NICO MINORU**

oh.

**NICO MINORU**

you wanna talk about it?

Karolina hates that her heart skips a beat at that. Hates that they’ve come so far, and now Karolina is going to completely ruin it with this crush.

**KAROLINA DEAN**
just me dreaming about falling on every jump.

**NICO MINORU**
well good. get it all out now in your dreams. :)

Karolina can’t help but laugh.

**KAROLINA DEAN**
im not sure that’s how it works. ;)

**NICO MINORU**
as great as it is to hear from you, i also don’t want to be a party to your insomnia.

**NICO MINORU**
anything i can do to help?

(Her heart feels like its going to burst because at the very least, Karolina knows that Nico cares about her.)

**KAROLINA DEAN**
not that i can think of unfortunately.

**KAROLINA DEAN**
excited to be back to training?

Karolina gasps at Nico’s response, which is a carefully posed selfie with Nico angling the camera to show that she’s on the ice.

It takes her a second to even register that Nico is on the ice because Karolina is too busy focusing on her sharp jawline.

**KAROLINA DEAN**
lookin good. :)
Karolina groans after she send it, realizing how dumb it sounds.

She sends a follow up.

KAROLINA DEAN
i’ll let you get back to it.

NICO MINORU
try to get some sleep, ok?

She doesn’t. Or at least, not a lot. But when she arrives at the rink later that day, Karolina has more makeup on than usual to try and hide how tired she looks.

It doesn’t fool Leslie one bit.

“You look exhausted. Didn’t you get any sleep last night?”

Leslie grabs Karolina’s chin, looking over her face with great scrutiny.

“Yes. I’ll be fine. It’s just nerves, I guess,” Karolina answers, waving her mother’s hand away.

“Remember your training. There’s no reason for you not to win.”

“Okay,” she replies, not even bothering to fight her on that, to tell her mother to lower her expectations just for once.

Karolina’s too tired for that.

She goes through the six minute warm-up period like she does any other competition, and maybe, she thinks, it’s a good thing that she’s this tired. Because it doesn’t even seem to register with her that this is the Grand Prix Final.

The nerves don’t come at all.

Not any more than they do for any other competition.

Karolina can’t wait to just go to sleep.

Karolina steps out onto the ice as the girl before her reaches the door. She’s used to blocking out everything around her. Cheers and reactions for the audience, the emotions of the person who has skated just before her, and her mom. All of it fades away, as though she has blinders on, as her blades come in contact with the ice once more.

She stays towards the edge of the rink as young skaters sweep the ice for stuffed animals, gifts, and anything that may have fallen onto the ice during the last girl’s performance. As they clear out, she warms her muscles, skating around the rink. Out of the corner of her eye she sees someone that, in
this moment, when her brain is (trying to be) fixed only on the task at hand, looks just like Nico. She quickly turns her head, and her heart flutters in her chest.

But of course it’s not her.

Obviously it’s not her.

She was talking to her only hours ago.

So why is she so excited over seeing not-Nico? Right before she’s about to skate in the Grand Prix Final?

Karolina chastises herself and tries to focus on the music that’s about to start playing, the jumps she’s had nightmares about falling on, the spins that she swears she can do in her sleep.

Karolina feels like she might have to.

She’s so tired.

Just as she shakes her head, clearing her thoughts of Nico’s lookalike, she hears the announcer call her name.

Karolina exhales deeply, adjusting the strap of her dress up on her shoulder as she looks at her mom for a moment, not even having to listen to know Leslie is reminding her to keep her head in the game, to fight for every landing and level as though it all depends on her—because it all depends on her.

And then, she’s skating away again, a bright smile stretching across her face as she gathers speed and skates to her starting position.

She stretches, points, extends, and pirouettes as the music starts and grows, the entirety of the program engrained in her memory. She accelerates as she begins to cross the ice and prepares for her first jumping pass. She pulls off a strong triple lutz, her arms stretching above her head to increase the difficulty.

But as she comes down, she wavers, and instead of another triple jump to end the combination, she can only pull off a double.

And even then, she steps out of the landing.

She tries to push the mistake out of her mind as she hurries forward to stay in time with the music, just in time for Celine Dion’s voice to come over the speakers as she enters her first spin. She stretches and contorts her body before willing herself to stay perfectly still. Karolina knows that the rest of this program has to be perfect, and she can’t give any more points away than she already has.

She exhales as she exits the spin, her gaze focusing quickly to remedy a bit of dizziness. In just a matter of seconds, she’s entering her second spin, this one involving several displays of flexibility and strength as she balances on her blade.

She begins skating again, this part more delicate to match with the music. Karolina knows she’s not committing to it the way she usually does though, as she thinks about the jump that lays just ahead.

She launches into the air and lands the double axel without a problem, and she breathes a small sigh of relief. She gathers more and more power as she glides down the length of the ice, preparing herself for her final jump, and her last chance at a triple in this program. She refocuses and then taps
her toe into the ice for the triple flip. She fights for the landing and stays on her feet, gliding backwards out of it.

Now that the jumps are out of the way, she knows she has to focus more on selling this performance.

That’s her strong suit, and so far she hasn’t been connecting with the music and audience the way she usually does.

(And she can’t stop thinking about how tired she is.)

Karolina begins twisting this way and that, precise turns accompanied by movements that accentuate the lyrics and draw in the crowd. Every push or pivot has its own extension or arm movement, and Karolina’s drive to perform takes control.

The step sequence sails by, and Karolina enters her final spin with a flourish. She pulls her leg up from behind her until her foot is well above her head and her back is arched. As the music ends, she reaches her final position and pushes a smile across her lips. She knows she can’t let her disappointment show. And she knows her mother will be disappointed enough for the both of them once she is off the ice.

Grabbing a stuffed bear that has landed at her feet following her curtsies, she skates off the ice to a waiting Leslie. Her mom’s smile is tense, a show for the cameras as they walk over to the kiss and cry booth.

*Once a performer, always a performer,* Karolina thinks to herself.

Karolina holds her breath as the scores are announced, and she finds herself in second going into the long program.

Once they’re out of sight of the cameras, walking back towards the locker rooms, Leslie’s smile dissipates and she looks over at her daughter.

“Looks like you’re distracted,” she announces in a low but stern voice.

Karolina tries to not let her mom’s tone get to her.

“I’m not distracted. Not every skate is going to be perfect, and I’d rather have good programs at Nationals.”

“Have you been hanging out with Nico again?” Leslie asks pointedly.

Karolina has to struggle not to scoff and raise her voice.

Because it’s so ridiculous. As if Nico has somehow caused Karolina to not land a triple-triple.

(And then Karolina wonders maybe, if she weren’t so distracted, she would have landed the jump.)

Leslie doesn’t need to know that.

And Karolina needs her to stop blaming Nico for every mistake.

“Why is that at all relevant?”

Leslie remains unphased by her daughter’s question.

“Answer the question.”
Karolina can’t help but roll her eyes.

“Oh come on, you knew she was at the Yorkes’ when we had that party the other night.”

“Oh, it was a party now, was it?” Leslie’s arms cross over her chest. “Were Dale and Stacey
allowing drinking?”

“Mom, no, that’s not what I meant,” Karolina rushes to reply.

Leslie just looks at her daughter, and for a moment Karolina thinks that’s the end of the conversation.
If only she could be so lucky.

“I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

She desperately wants to call bullshit. Because Karolina knows this isn’t about keeping her safe. It’s
about keeping her winning and keeping her cornered off from the rest of the world.

“Why do you hate Nico so much?”

She doesn’t mean for it to come out as harsh as it does.

But she’s so fucking tired.

Physically tired. Tired of having to try to convince Leslie that Nico isn’t the terrible person she seems
to want to believe Nico is.

Karolina is tired, and she wants her bed, and she wants her friends, and she misses Nico and—

“I don’t hate her. But I want your training kept separate. She is competition. Nothing else.”

And Karolina snaps.

Because, god, as much as it scares her and as much as she wants it to go away, Nico is so much
more than competition.

“I am more than capable of separating my feelings from training,” Karolina shouts, her words
echoing into the empty locker room.

Leslie’s eyes widen, and Karolina thinks she’s never seen her mother so surprised toward her.
Karolina can’t decide if it’s the fact that she just raised her voice at her mother, or the fact that she
definitely just accidentally made it sound like she has feelings for Nico.

Which she does.

But there’s no way in hell her mother ever needs to know that.

Nobody ever needs to know that.

Ever.

“I just mean, like, our friendship,” Karolina recovers quickly, and her mother’s face returns to a dark,
stoic glare. “My friendships with everyone at the rink.”

Leslie raises an eyebrow.

“You and Nico are friends?”
Karolina physically feels herself relax because, while Leslie is probably not thrilled at that prospect either, it’s better than her knowing she has a crush on Nico.

“Can you just let this go please?”

Leslie turns and leaves the locker room without another word.

The ride back to their hotel is silent.

For once, Karolina is too tired to be worried about it.

It’s afternoon in LA when Karolina turns to the hotel, so Karolina dials Gert’s number in hopes to vent her frustration.

The screen lights up and shows both Gert and Chase sitting close to each other.

Oh.

“Well hello to… both of you.”

A look of panic flashes across Gert’s face quickly, just enough for Karolina to see it. Chase seems unphased as he greets her.

“Hey!”

“We were just watching the livestream together,” Gert reasons.

“Right.”

Karolina stares down Gert from across the screen, the silent question very clear.

“How’s it going over there? How are you feeling about it?”

“Oh, you know, my mom is blaming Nico for me being in second place,” Karolina answers in a fake cheerful voice.

“Sounds like the Leslie thing to do,” Gert replies.

“And now she probably knows that I have a crush on Nico so—”

Karolina closes her mouth so tightly that she accidentally bites down hard on her lip.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. That was not supposed to come out. Not now.

Maybe not ever.

Gert and Chase are giving her identical looks—both of their jaws dropped and eyes alight with curiosity and delight.

“I’m sorry. What was that?” Gert asks.

Karolina’s eyes dart around, looking anywhere but at Gert or Chase.

“Nothing. I said nothing,” she mumbles, considering hitting the red button to terminate the call and then escape to a rural village, change her name, and never be heard from again.
“Did you just admit—"

“Gert,” Chase interjects. “Be careful. Don’t scare her off.”

Karolina sees her reflection in the small screen of her face in the corner, and she’s pretty sure she’s never seen her face this red.

“I just mean that I…perhaps…maybe…”

She’s already said it out loud.

She can’t really take it back now.

“Oh my god, you have feelings for Nico. I knew it. I knew it, didn’t I, Chase?”

“Gert—"

The two start trying to talk over each other, Chase trying to get Gert to quiet down, and Gert beginning a monologue about the compulsory heterosexuality that Karolina must have suffered only to get to this moment, where now she’s too afraid to admit she likes another girl.

“Can we all just stop for a second, please?” Karolina finally asks, a little louder and firmer than she intended.

Gert and Chase immediately stop and turn back to the screen, looking apologetic.

“Listen, that is…not why I called. So can we please talk about anything other than that?”

Gert looks particularly disappointed when she asks, “Can we revisit it at another time?”

Karolina rolls her eyes.

She knows she won’t get out of this, and there’s no point in trying.

“Yes.”

“Then, by all means, carry on.”

“I just feel like I’m gonna snap,” Karolina groans.

Chase frowns across the screen.

“Your mom?”

“Yes. Why did you all not tell me how terrible she actually is?”

“Are you kidding me?” Gert adds. “You find a way to go look at your past self and imagine telling that girl that her mom isn’t the heroine she’s cracked her up to be.”

And unfortunately, it’s true. Karolina always looked the other way if she saw her mother’s questionable coaching tactics in play with other skaters. Always believed that Leslie was just doing what was best for her students in the end—it was never how Karolina would choose to coach, but her mother knew what she was doing, right?

She used to pretend she didn’t see it.

Karolina can’t help but hate herself a little bit for only realizing when Nico showed up.
“Maybe it’s best that you’re seeing this on your own.”

“What’s causing such an intense reaction right now, anyway?” Gert asks.

Karolina sighs, rubs a hand over her face in frustration.

“Just…her grilling me about every relationship I have and whether or not it benefits or distracts from my training. I just… I just want to feel normal for a bit. And I can’t do that at all because not only am I a full-time skater with no time for people outside of those I see because of skating, but now I discover I am a closeted gay figure skater.”

Gert and Chase both seem a little shocked by Karolina’s sudden outburst, her voice having risen dramatically over the course of her statement. Karolina sighs again and leaves out the part about how she’s also pretty sure she wants to kiss the one girl her coach wants her to stay away from.

“And I’m just so tired of Leslie’s bullshit. I can’t handle her making all these unprofessional jabs at Nico. At anyone.”

Gert and Chase just give her sullen looks.

Karolina knows it’s going to be a long couple of days in Japan.

Thank goodness she’s finally able to get Leslie off her back two days later when Karolina is holding a gold medal and has been installed as the Olympic favorite.

//

Karolina returns to LA with a flurry of congratulations and support from everyone at Gibborim.

All she really cares about is the text Nico sends her, asking her if they can meet at the rink that evening.

Flying high on the confidence boost of winning the Grand Prix Final, Karolina convinces herself it’s a good idea.

And who is Karolina to say no?

Nico whirls around the ice to her program, this time around adding just a couple of her jumps—her ankle feeling stronger every day, Nico tells her—as Karolina watches in awe from the boards.

She can tell that Nico is becoming much more comfortable with the program, having probably practiced it many times while Karolina was in Japan.

But as much as Karolina can’t keep herself from smiling just watching Nico skate again, she can’t help but feel like it’s missing something.

Nico finishes the piece, breathing heavily, hands on her hips, and circling around to catch her breath, when Karolina joins her on the ice again.

“How did that feel?”

Nico huffs out a few deep breaths before replying.
“Pretty good, actually. I’m winded, but good.”

Nico looks down at the ice, twisting her toepick into the ground in front of her, and Karolina’s heart nearly stops knowing that Nico appears to be nervous right now.

“What did you think?”

Karolina smiles fully, Nico still staring intently at the ground.

“I really like it,” Karolina answers.

But Nico looks up suddenly, and Karolina realizes she must not have sold Nico on her answer. She really does like it.

But she knows Nico can do better.

“That did not sound convincing at all.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just… I don’t know how much I should say now that you’re going to be working on this with my mom.”

Nico rolls her eyes at the mention of Leslie’s name but smiles at Karolina.

“I think at this point I’d almost rather have you coaching me.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Karolina answers, and she could kick herself for how husky her voice sounds when she answers.

She really needs to reel in the flirting.

But she really can’t help herself when Nico looks like that.

(Who knew that watching someone else skate was such a turn on?)

Karolina is so grateful that she has the choreography to focus on and not Nico.

Not that balancing the two is proving to be an easy task at all.

“Seriously, what did you think of it? I’m sure you’ll give me better feedback than her.”

Karolina wills herself to stop thinking about Nico’s tight and graceful spins and answer her question.

“Okay, fine.”

Nico looks like she’s bracing for impact, and it kills Karolina knowing that this is how Nico reacts when she receives feedback. Because she knows it’s probably not even constructive feedback but just a laundry list of every little thing she’s doing wrong. Karolina just wishes she could hug her and tell her how amazing she is.

But she also knows how much Nico truly wants feedback. Meaningful feedback.

And would probably much rather take it from Karolina than Leslie.

“I feel like you’re holding back a lot. And maybe that just has to do with the fact that you’re not doing all your jumps and are just kind of getting used to the feel of the program, but I feel like something you can work on still while you get your strength back is the performance aspect of the
“We all know I’m no good at that,” Nico quips, rolling her eyes.

“That is not a valid excuse anymore, Nico.”

Nico rolls her eyes again.

“I’m serious. I’ve seen what you can do. Don’t let something as great as this end up being something where you just go through the motions.”

Nico looks like she wants to say something, like she doesn’t quite believe Karolina.

Karolina wants so badly to make Nico see how special she really is.

Ever since that night before she left for Japan, it’s like a flip has been switched in Karolina. Like every little thing Nico does is amazing, and Karolina so badly wishes that Nico could see it.

“Okay, what did you have in mind?” Nico finally asks.

“There are so many great moments that you’re not entirely taking advantage of. Here—”

Karolina skates a large circle around Nico and starts mimicking some of the choreography.

“For example, ‘who’ll be reckless just enough, who’ll get hurt but who learns how to toughen up…’ try something bigger like this.”

Karolina talks through the phrase, embellishing her arm movements.

“Or, that big climax with the chorus… ‘she used to be mine’…like that.”

Karolina models a spiral for Nico as the other girl nods in affirmation.

Nico begins skating around and attempts to copy Karolina’s spiral, crossing her arms across her chest before flaring them out to the sides to punctuate the words associated with her movements. She balances on one foot and leans forward, soaring across the ice.

“More like this?” Nico asks when she returns to where Karolina is standing at center ice.

“Yeah, getting there.”

“Well, how do I get there?”

When Karolina was younger, and the artistic part of her skating did not come as easily, sometimes Leslie would skate around with her while practicing. Karolina remembers how much the two would laugh and smile. How back then, Leslie would still praise her more than tear her down.

She thinks about how it’s one of the few memories she has of her mother that somehow haven’t been tainted.

She thinks about how much things have changed since then.

And then Karolina thinks about how much fun it might be to share that with Nico.

“Come on, follow me.”

Without another word, Karolina skates toward where Nico’s phone is plugged in.
“What are we doing?”

“Starting the song over.”

She motions for Nico to get in her starting position, and Karolina presses play.

“Follow me.”

Nico just holds her arms out in confusion as Karolina takes off, looking back at Nico and waiting for her to follow.

Karolina has her skate around, mostly marking the program and going through the motions, until Karolina cues her.

“Now here—bigger, more movement.”

Nico spins around, her arms moving elegantly about and reaching toward the ceiling before coming down to run through her hair and down her neck.

Karolina is starting to realize how terrible of an idea this is, because watching Nico make these faces and do this choreography up close is making it much harder to stay focused.

“Good! Better,” Karolina chokes out.

(She tries to blame it on the fact that she’s just winded and tired.)

Nico starts twirling through her choreo sequence, Karolina backing up just a bit to give Nico more room.

“Is this better?” Nico calls out as she finishes.

And it is. It so is. Karolina can see the emotion on Nico’s face like she did that first time she saw the program, and its breathtaking. Karolina skates backwards while Nico skates forward towards her, careful to maintain a safe distance.

But Karolina can’t stop staring as Nico puts together the rest of the piece with the spiral at that perfect climactic moment, the feelings of longing and hurt and love all over her face.

Karolina realizes she’s slowed down considerably as they cross the diagonal of the rink, skating quickly toward a corner, and Nico doesn’t have time to pull up before she’s tripping over Karolina and pushing her back into the wall.

Karolina feels her back slam into the boards and somehow has quick enough reflexes to keep herself upright, ducking her head to keep it from hitting the wall behind her, her arms landing on Nico’s shoulders and Nico’s hands anchoring on Karolina’s hips. She can feel Nico’s breath ghosting across her face as Karolina keeps her eyes fixed on the ice and their nearly tangled feet. Nico’s fingers are digging into her hips, and when Karolina finally peers up, Karolina swears that Nico’s eyes fall right on her lips.

She feels like she’s going to pass out.

They’re inches apart, and Karolina can feel her self-control very quickly fading with Nico this close. Neither of them makes the effort to move apart.

“That was better,” Karolina pretty much squeaks out, and she’s pretty sure she starts blushing from
how ridiculous her voice sounds.

Nico gulps and finally meets Karolina’s eyes.

“How ridiculous her voice sounds.”

Nico just watches her for a few seconds longer, and Karolina would do anything to get inside of Nico’s head. To know what she’s thinking. Know what she’s feeling.

To know if she’s even feeling half of what Karolina is right now.

Nico’s gaze flutters down to Karolina’s lips again, and Karolina knows she’ll do something stupid if she doesn’t stop this now. Karolina clears her throat and removes her hands from Nico’s shoulders, Nico quickly letting go of her hips and jumping back.

“Um, I think that’s probably...a good start,” Karolina mumbles, trying to hide her gravelly voice.

“Yeah, great. Uh, thank you. For all your help,” Nico replies.

Nico skates a small circle around the area they’re in, seemingly checking herself for any injuries and shaking out her hands that held so tightly to Karolina’s hips.

“Of course. Anytime.”

“Just as long as Leslie isn’t around,” Nico jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

(Somehow, Karolina gets stuck on the thought of them sneaking around, and it makes matters that much worse.)

“Exactly,” Karolina answers, entirely unconvincingly.

They exit the ice and move around each other in silence, barely saying another word until they head to their respective cars and wave goodbye.

When Karolina finally settles into the driver’s seat and clutches the steering wheel, still thinking about Nico’s touch burning on her hips, she takes a deep breath out and knows she’s in big trouble.

//

Nico sits at a table in the coffee shop, hands wrapped around her tea mug, pretending to be staring at something on her laptop.
In reality, she’s focused on the soreness in her ankle.

But even that seems to be of less importance than the fact that Leslie has still barely spoken to her with two and a half weeks until Nationals.

The past two days, her “coach” has finally paid her some attention but continues to use their formal lesson time to mostly watch Nico skate around, bark a few orders, and watch other students.

At least she’s letting Nico keep the choreography.

Not that Leslie really seems to care either way.

Nico maps out the season’s possible endings in her head:

She could podium at Nationals, go to the Olympics. Maybe compete in Worlds after that depending on how she feels.

Or she could fail miserably at Nationals and not qualify for the Olympics. The season wouldn’t be over if she didn’t want it to be—she’ll likely get a spot at Four Continents, maybe Worlds too, depending on who decides to go and who doesn’t. But it wouldn’t be Pyeongchang.

Either way, she still has a few competitions left in her this season.

But then what?

What comes after that?

Nico’s not sure that she ever expected her time at Gibborim to be a long-term thing.

Then again, she’s not sure that she’s ever thought ahead that far. And now, with the season’s end closer in sight and a coach who’s all but written her off, Nico’s not entirely sure what to do.

Maybe she’ll leave.

It’s clear to Nico that Leslie doesn’t want her around. Even clearer that she still doesn’t want her around Karolina.

Which is getting more difficult every day.

Nico takes a sip of the tea and tries to focus on the fact that its still way too hot for her to be drinking instead of… whatever is going on with her and Karolina.

She’s invited Chase to meet her here for that exact reason, because she has no idea what’s going on. Just that something’s changed.

And Nico isn’t entirely convinced that she likes it.

She thinks back to the night before, their collision on the ice.

And how Nico had to let her eyes get caught on Karolina’s full, parted lips… is it weird to notice someone’s lips?

And thank god Chase walks in and takes a seat beside her before she can spiral down some hole thinking about Karolina Dean’s lips.

“Hey,” he greets as he sits down.
Nico keeps staring straight ahead, still pretending she’s on her laptop, when in reality she’s gotten herself fixated on thinking about Karolina’s smile.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Chase asks, surely sensing how distracted Nico is.

“Uh…”

She fumbles over a few words, trying to think about what to say because *wow she is not ready to have this conversation with Chase.*

So instead she decides to take control again.

“So you gonna tell me about what’s going on with you and Gert?”

Chase’s eyes widen, his grip on his coffee cup tightening, and Nico knows she’s back on the offensive.

It’s Chase’s turn to stumble over words as he tries to answer Nico.

“I, um…I guess…”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Stein. I saw you two being way too handsy at Friendsgiving.”

Chase blushes and refuses to meet Nico’s eyes.

“We’re just…hanging out a lot I guess lately. I don’t know. It’s kind of weird how you can go from seeing someone as one of your best friends to suddenly…more? I don’t know. If that makes sense, I guess.”

Nico just nods because she’s starting to realize she knows exactly what Chase means.

“So like, are you dating now or…?”

“Oh! No. I don’t think so? We haven’t really… had that conversation.”

Chase stops, but Nico raises an eyebrow because she knows there’s more than what he’s giving.

Chase mumbles something under his breath that Nico can’t quite hear.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I said we make out sometimes.”

“Oh my god! How long has this been going on?”

Chase sighs, looks a little embarrassed, and answers.

“Just like a week. It’s really new. Nobody knows. You can’t tell anyone, okay?”

Nico just chuckles.

“You really think Molly doesn’t know?”

Chase opens his mouth and closes it again a couple of times.

“But we haven’t told her?”
“You do know that girl is more perceptive than any of us, right? Also the fact that she’s wanted you two together for literal years?”

Chase smiles softly at that.

“Really?”

“Of course.”

Nico smiles back at him, this boy she’s known for years. He looks lighter than he has in some time, like he finally believes there’s more to him than skating and the drama surrounding their parents.

Nico hopes she can feel that way too.

The conversation trails off, and Chase is watching Nico like he knows that she didn’t ask to meet here to talk about him and Gert.

She wishes she could go home, or tell him she needs help with some online homework. Or something.

But thinking about Karolina has been eating her alive just since last night, and she’s not entirely sure how much of her sanity she’ll lose if she lets it build up much longer.

“Something’s changed,” is all she says to begin.

“What do you mean?”

Nothing. Nothing at all.

Nothing that would imply that she and Karolina just became close friends, and now something is going to completely ruin it. Nothing at all.

“Like… with me and Karolina.”

Nico’s stomach cramps up with anxiety so much that she wonders if her body might actually be trying to kill her as a way to get her to stop talking about this.

“Oh,” is all Chase says, his expression unreadable.

Nico watches as he takes another sip of coffee to hide his face.

“Why do I feel like there’s something you want to say?”

Chase shrugs and swallows his coffee.

“There’s not. I just want to know what you mean.”

And Nico just shrugs in return because where does she even begin?

“Like… things have just been really intense lately.”

“You’re fighting again?”

“No, not like, bad intense. Just… different.”

Chase just keeps looking at her with the same unreadable expression.
“Like, we just keep having these moments.”

“Like what?”

Nico shrugs. Because seriously, like what?

She’s not sure she could describe it if she tried.

But Nico tries.

“Like one of us will say something, or do something, and the next thing I know, its like the rest of
the world is entirely gone. And we just stare at each other.”

Nico just shakes her head, because she knows how ridiculous it sounds out loud. Hates how
vulnerable it’s making her feel.

“I don’t know what it is.”

Chase’s expression is more thoughtful, and it’s like he’s anticipating getting the chance to start
talking.

It’s unnerving.

Like he somehow could have a better idea of what’s going on than Nico does.

And it’s scary to feel that lack of control that comes with knowing that someone else has better
insight into your own life than you.

“Okay, now what do you want to say? I can tell it’s something.”

Chase sighs and lets go of his coffee cup.

He turns his full attention toward Nico.

“You know, people always say the opposite of love is—”

Nico cuts him off almost immediately at the way her heart absolutely lurches at the word “love.”

“Whoa, Stein, where are you going with this?”

He holds up his hands defensively.

“Just let me finish. I’m not trying to imply anything.”

Nico sighs and lets him go on, clutching her tea cup with a vice grip.

“The opposite of love is indifference. And even from the very start, you and Karolina have never
been indifferent toward each other.”

“It really feels like you’re implying that I want to fuck one of my friends.”

Nico means it as a joke, but she’s pretty sure it provokes more of a reaction within herself than it
does in Chase.

It’s true. Karolina and Nico have never been indifferent toward each other. Ever since Nico first saw
Karolina when they were both 11 years old, she’s been drawn to her in the most frustrating way,
focused on her as her number one rival because that’s the girl who ruined Nico’s undefeated
intermediate season.

“What I’m trying to say is that I feel like you and Karolina haven’t always properly identified the emotions you’re feeling toward each other or are letting other people dictate them for you. For example, Karolina growing up with Leslie telling her you’re her rival, her competition, and trying to breed this jealousy or anger or whatever it is. And your parents doing the same. And instead of letting yourselves figure out how you felt about each other, you just assumed you were bitter toward the other and never questioned it.”

And oh.

That actually makes sense.

“How did you get so fucking insightful, Chase?”

“Proper combination of dealing with my own trauma and living with the Yorkeses.”

He smiles wryly, and Nico’s stomach starts knotting up again.

Because what does this all mean?

“So what, you’re saying I’ve just lowkey had a crush on Karolina for seven years but have repressed it entirely?”

“Not necessarily. I just mean that what you’ve both felt has actually evolved over time, but you can’t figure out what it is because you both have always assumed it’s a strong negative emotion.”

Nico starts to wonder how much she actually hated Karolina growing up, and how much of it was actually hating the system. Hating Leslie and Tina for how they’d both driven a wedge between the two girls from a young, impressionable age. Hating how lonely it was, and continues to be, at the top. Hating how she and Karolina could have been there for each other through all of that, but…

Anything of that nature was stolen from them.

And now… now they have that.

And now, for some reason, it’s not enough. And Nico keeps finding herself ruminating on and picking apart all these moments in her head, trying to figure out what it is that keeps her wanting Karolina’s attention on her and scares her every time it is. Why she’s suddenly having trouble keeping her mind off Karolina’s eyes and lips and smile and the feel of her hips in Nico’s hands and —

Oh god, does she have a crush on Karolina?

“But I’m not even… I’m straight. I think. Right?”

Chase’s mouth just opens and closes several times. He blinks rapidly and shrugs his shoulders in confusion.

“How am I supposed to answer that?”

“Or maybe it’s just this weird sort of thing where I want what I can’t have? Like I’m not actually attracted to her, but it’s just a thing because Leslie told me to stay away from her?”

And maybe that is the case, Nico thinks, but that still doesn’t answer this new burning question that has her suddenly confused about how well she knows herself.
Does she like girls?

What is going on?

But Nico keeps trying to wrap her head around it all the way she wraps her hands tighter around the mug in her hands, thinking about the way being so close to Karolina last night gave her heady feeling that lingers even now—how the crack in Karolina’s voice suggested that she was feeling just as much as Nico. How the feel of Karolina’s soft hands on her shoulders wasn’t at all unwelcomed. How she really didn’t want to let go.

Nico thinks back to what Chase had just said earlier.

*It’s kind of weird how you can go from seeing someone as one of your best friends to suddenly… more.*

She gets it.

But maybe this thing with Karolina has been a long time coming, and it’s just taken Nico this long to begin to unravel it all.

“I don’t know, Nico,” Chase answers. “It doesn’t even have to be a romantic tension.”

But what that scares Nico the most is that part of her is hoping that it is.

Chapter End Notes

1) i didn't even notice i made the time "307" until after the fact and was like omg unintentional clexa references.
2) karolina's short program is to "it's all coming back to me now" inspired by loena hendrickx's program to the same song.
3) thank you for your patience. i feel like there was more i wanted to say but you know what just never mind i cant remember lol
4) kudos and comment pls
It’s hard, Nico discovers, when you have something keeping you in a place you’d otherwise want to leave.

She’s still strongly considering changing coaches after the season. If anything, the idea of leaving has become even more enticing. Nico knows that if she can prove herself at Nationals and make it to the Olympics, any coach would be clawing their way through to have her.

If a sprained ankle makes her coach think that she’s basically useless, makes her so hands off instead of continuing to fight for her season…

She’ll never tell Leslie because Nico knows she won’t even care. But it hurts.

She’s done.

But then she thinks about what she would be leaving behind.

Who she would be leaving behind.

And maybe in any other situation, it wouldn’t be this hard because she’d probably still get the chance to see her friends regularly if she stayed somewhere else nearby.

But no rink in the area compares to Gibborim.

And there’s no way Leslie would let her skaters—let her daughter—come near Nico if she chose to leave.

The very thought almost makes Nico want to leave even more. The entire skating community knows how tough Leslie is, even knows that some of her morals and practices are questionable at best.
But they ignore it.

Having power has a way of letting you do that, Nico’s realized.

She tries to calm her breathing as she sits and ties her skates in the locker room, ignoring the milling about of other skaters. Focuses instead on the tinge of pain she still gets in her ankle as she laces up.

She’s found that she’s right back to where she started when she got here these past couple days—avoiding, ignoring, wanting to be left alone.

It’s the only way to make it a clean break.

Nico wants to tell Karolina—she really does.

But Nico wishes she could fast-forward through that part. Fast-forward through the inevitable look of hurt in Karolina’s eyes, how she’ll probably blame herself. Or worse—defend Leslie.

But Nico can’t do it. It’s not worth how taxing Leslie’s “coaching” (yelling) is on her mind. And besides, it’ll hurt now, but in the end, its for the best.

Right?

Nico gets a better coaching environment, maybe even starts thinking about what comes after skating. She doesn’t have to worry about these feelings with Karolina. Maybe they can maintain a civil friendship… from a distance.

It’s for the best.

That’s what Nico has started to try to convince herself. Tries to convince herself that it has everything to do with Leslie and nothing to do with her relationship with Karolina.

Nico walks into the rink and sees Karolina running her program, Leslie in the center barking out orders as usual.

And as Nico watches the way Karolina floats around the ice, its easy to forget every argument she’s just made for leaving.

Because Karolina makes Nico want.

She wants Karolina in her life, and she’s still not entirely sure the extent of how (or she’s afraid of admitting to herself), but she wants.

Nico can’t allow herself to want something.

Because as fucked as it sounds, Nico thinks she spent all of her wanting for the near future on making the decision to leave her family behind on the east coast. That was her selfish move for an indefinite, arbitrary time period Nico has made up in her head, until she someday decides she’s earned the right to want something again.

But she can’t want Karolina.

She won’t.

It’s better for both of them.

And it’s better for both of them that Nico leaves.
Nico can’t help but remember what Chase had said a few days ago, how she and Karolina were never allowed to properly figure out how they actually felt around each other. Because labels like rival and competition and enemy were already conveniently placed there for them.

She watches Karolina longingly, and damn it—she needs to stop.

She lets out a jagged sigh as the moment is broken when Karolina appears to trip over her own feet and fall ass-first onto the ice.

(Nico has to remind herself that it’s not at all endearing.)

“I need you to focus, Karolina,” Leslie yells out as Karolina picks herself up.

And it’s the way Leslie says it that pushes Nico further back into her memories, still thinking about when they had first met and everything in Nico’s life changed without her even realizing it at the time.

Because they weren’t always rivals.

For just a little while, they were two kids just trying to have fun in pretty dresses.

“Are you Nico?”

There’s a small blonde girl next to her all the sudden. Nico looks up to see the girl who’s sitting in first after the short program—Karolina she thinks her name is.

Nico bristles at the girl, who takes the opportunity to sit down next to her. It’s odd. No one usually talks to her during events. Or at least, no one goes out of their way to start conversations with her.

This is different.

And Nico likes different.

Karolina smiles brightly when she offers, “I really like your dress.”

And Nico smiles back, the tension easing a bit.

Maybe the other skaters can be nice. Even if her mom tells her that they’re not.

“Thank you.”

“I thought you skated really well,” Karolina continues.

“So did you. My mom said you’ll be hard to beat.”

Karolina’s jaw drops slightly, like she’s just made the most amazing connection in her head.

“Was your mom a skater too?”

Nico shakes her head. She didn’t know that Karolina’s mom is a skater.

“No, she just really likes when I do,” Nico answers.

And she does. Mom loves coming to see her and Amy skate. Likes it even more when they do well.

“So does mine. She says it’s a family thing.”
“My older sister Amy skates too,” Nico shares, settling in to the conversation.

Karolina’s nice. Nico wonders why other skaters aren’t this nice. The only nice skater she knows is Chase. Chase is her best friend.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Nico asks.

“No. It’s just me and my mom and dad.”

“Oh. Well I bet you have lots of friends.”

Karolina shrugs.

“Everyone at the rink, I guess. No more school friends now that I’m homeschooled.”

Nico smiles at the discovery that they have something else in common.

“Me too.”

“Well maybe we can be friends then.”

Karolina gives her the brightest smile she can in spite of her braces, which are matching her pink skating dress.

It’s nice. Nico loves skating. She has from a young age. Plus, it means she gets to spend time with Amy.

But as she’s gotten older (she’s 11 now), the people have gotten less friendly. The coaching has gotten more intense. There’s more orders and structure and crying on Niko’s end.

But this? This is nice.

She likes this Karolina.

A tall woman with reddish-blonde hair pokes her head in at the two girls, and Nico realizes this must be Karolina’s mom.

“Karolina dear, I need you to focus,” the woman says sternly, and Karolina nods, rising from the bench next to Nico and walking over to her kneeling mother.

Karolina’s mom must think she’s being quieter than she is. Or maybe she wants Nico to hear.

But the next words out of her mouth hurt like the time Nico accidentally cut her finger on the blade of one of her skates.

“These girls aren’t our friends.”

Nico chances a glance over at the two, where Karolina’s mom is looking at her daughter with a serious look. Karolina’s back is turned to Nico.

“Why not? She’s just being nice,” Nico can hear her say.

“They’re your competition, Karolina. We don’t talk to them when we’re trying to focus.”

The woman looks past Karolina and at Nico, who is still watching, and Nico is on the receiving end of one of the scariest glares she’s ever seen. Nico looks away quickly, focusing in on the chipped
paint of a blue locker in front of her.

She hears Karolina’s mother rise and walk away from the bench Nico is sitting at with Karolina in tow.

“Why don’t you come sit over here?”

Nico watches as the tall woman leads Karolina over to the other end of the locker room and pats the seat of a chair.

Nico holds her breath, hoping that Karolina will say no and come back.

But she doesn’t.

Karolina nods and sits down obediently on the chair.

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon. You get ready now.”

Karolina’s mom walks past Nico, and their eyes meet again as she gives Niko a disapproving look.

Karolina just keeps her head down, refusing to look up at Nico.

And it hurts.

Because Nico hoped Karolina was different.

But Nico sighs as she realizes that Chase is her only skating friend because the two don’t compete against each other.

//

Karolina grunts as she takes a seat in the locker room, still sore from when she had fallen earlier.

She spies Nico at one of the paper towel dispensers drying her hands off.

“Hey!” Karolina calls out.

She immediately regrets it and snaps her mouth shut because wow, way to sound way too eager.

Her voice comes out squeakier than it should, and her heart is palpitating at the thought of being alone with Nico because she hasn’t seen her in three days. Not since…whatever the hell that was on the ice.

Truth be told, Karolina has been avoiding Nico.

Because the butterflies have gotten worse, and her palms get sweaty, and she feels like she can’t breathe every time she so much as thinks about Nico’s hands on her hips and her breath on her face.

(Which is like, all the time.)

She really hasn’t wanted to know how much more intense that’ll be when Nico is actually in the same room as her.
But Karolina doesn’t really have a choice now.

“Hey. How are you?” Nico replies with a small smile.

Karolina laughs nervously because *god* she is a *mess*.

She’s just glad Gert isn’t here to see this.

Or Molly.

Or Chase.

Or anyone else for that matter.

“There’s a week and a half before Nationals, and I’m Leslie Dean’s daughter. I’m doing great,” she responds sarcastically.

Good. This is good. They can talk about skating. Better yet, talk about her *mom*. That’s the un-sexiest topic possible.

Nico sighs and leans against the lockers in such a way that her shirt rides up just a little, and the bottom of her abs are peaking out.

Karolina wonders if it’s possible to spontaneously combust.

“Yeah, today was kind of brutal, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Karolina chokes out, her eyes darting down to the floor.

*Think about Leslie. Think about Leslie. Think about Leslie.*

And she does. And that’s when Karolina swings from one extreme emotion to another, the stress response to Nico’s abs being channeled into an onslaught of stress over Nationals that she’s conveniently been avoiding.

It’s all too much.

Karolina realizes she’s been quiet too long, been staring at the same spot on the floor too long, when Nico’s voice pulls her back out.

“Everything okay?”

*No. It’s not. Because you’re really hot, and I have a giant crush on you but I know it’ll ruin this great friendship we’ve formed after years of hating each other, and as much as I’ve become a sucker for the enemies to friends to lovers trope in all the gay fanfiction I’ve been reading to get more in touch with my community, I can’t risk that. By the way, I’m gay! Also my mom is crazy and will probably hate me for being gay and also the Olympics are coming up? Is this what normal 18 year olds feel?*

That’s the immediate response that goes through Karolina’s head.

What she says instead is, “Just feels like it’s getting harder to breathe, you know? Like she’s always intense but its never been this bad.”

“Yeah.”
Nico goes quiet at this, her gaze falling to the floor and becoming sullen.

It’s unnerving, the sudden change.

“Are you okay?”

Nico shrugs.

“Yeah, I just…she doesn’t say much to me really, but when she does, it’s nothing flattering.”

Karolina’s stomach twists knowing that Leslie is still ignoring Nico. It’s been weeks since the initial sprain. Nationals is in less than two weeks, and Karolina has basically been the one coaching Nico.

Karolina’s not sure she’ll ever figure out this dissonance with her mother as a coach and her mother as her mother.

She hates it.

Because Karolina has realized that both of those people are bad people. And how the hell do you deal with your own mother just being a shitty person?

And it breaks her heart even more because she knows that Nico has to ask herself the same thing.

“I don’t know,” Nico finally continues.

“It just makes me want to think about my other options I guess.”

Her stomach twists further. What other options?

“Other options?” Karolina asks carefully.

Nico sighs, and she looks like she’s making a concerted effort to not look at Karolina as she says this.

Karolina’s heartbeat skyrockets for a completely different reason now. Because something is wrong.

“I’m not sure how long I thought I’d stay here when I first showed up. And I’m still not.”

Karolina feels like she’s had the wind knocked out of her and takes a gasping breath.

“Oh.”

And of course this would happen. Of fucking course.

Karolina’s mind goes blank, entirely unable to process anything.

“Look, I… it doesn’t mean I’m leaving, okay? I’m just frustrated.”

Nico keeps talking, but Karolina can barely hear her now. But the shock is quickly turning to frustration, pain, longing, a string of fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

“I haven’t even told anyone that I’m thinking about leaving.”

Karolina’s been staring at the ground this entire time, at the same spot Nico’s been looking at, until she notices that Nico’s looking at her now, willing Karolina to look at her.

She doesn’t look too closely, but Karolina swears that Nico has tears in her eyes.
“I just… I care about you, and I don’t want you to think that I’m keeping things from you.”

And again, Karolina wonders if it’s possible to spontaneously combust.

And Karolina knows it’s not that simple, but she can’t help but wonder if you really care about me, then why are you going to leave?

She’s angry now, and Karolina can’t decide if it’s at Nico or herself. Karolina feels so stupid—did she honestly think her stupid crush was going to amount to anything? Does she honestly think that Nico will stick around just for her?

She’s so fucking dumb.

She’s so angry.

“Just don’t make a decision as quickly as you did last time, okay?” she snaps.

Karolina isn’t even sure that she means it. But she’s so mad. She’s so mad, and she wants to fight. Because fighting Nico is what she’s known before all these feelings. Being against Nico is something she knows. It’s something safe.

And being angry will make it easier to let her go.

She hopes.

Nico narrows her eyes at this and pushes herself off the wall she’s still leaning against.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Karolina slaps her hands on either side of the bench she’s sitting on and rises, turning to face Nico.

“Nothing. Just that you’ve impulsively left rinks before, so forgive me for being a little worried.”

Nico scoffs and steps into Karolina’s space.

“You think what I did was impulsive? Sure seemed less impulsive than my dad and Chase’s mom having an affair.”

Karolina, like she has so many times with Nico, backpedals immediately.

“Nico—”

But Nico cuts her off, raising a hand and her voice.

“No, you don’t know how stressful it is to have that kind of instability.”

And now Karolina can see for sure that there’s tears in Nico’s eyes.

And how heavy the air feels standing this close to her once again.

“I’m literally just telling you that I’m weighing all my options.”

Nico is looking at her with pleading eyes, and Karolina knows rationally, that Nico’s intentions are good by telling her now. She hasn’t told anyone else—not her parents, not Chase, not Leslie.

That has to be significant somehow, right?
But more than anything, Karolina is aware of how she needs to look away or get some space.

Because she can’t handle Nico looking at her like that.

“Okay. Sorry,” Karolina mumbles, taking a step back and looking away.

“It doesn’t mean we won’t be friends anymore. We just won’t see each other every day. Why is it so important to you that I stay?”

Karolina turns around at that, fighting a sudden lump in her throat and trying to will the shakiness in her breathing to stop. She pretends to be organizing her bag, looking for something, anything, that would seem logical to pull out right now instead of just trying to busy herself.

Because god it’s a loaded question, and Nico doesn’t even realize.

Karolina thinks of how she could possibly respond to that.

_I want you to stay because I value our friendship._

_I want you to stay because you make me a better skater._

_I want you to stay because despite what you think, everyone here is going to miss you._

_I want you to stay because I think I might be in love with you._

Her hands stop as the last thought comes to her mind all too easily.

And it scares Karolina because she can’t even bring herself to deny it.

But she doesn’t say any of those things—can’t say any of those things—because they don’t sound like enough or they’re entirely too much.

“It’s not,” she rasps, desperately grasping to regain some control over the conversation.

It’s just like back in their hotel room in China all over again.

But Karolina doesn’t want to let it go yet, wants to keep asking Nico questions, as if making her think about it more and more will somehow make her realize that she should stay.

“I guess I just want to know why you even came here in the first place then?”

Nico sighs.

“Leslie approached me back at 2016 Junior Worlds wanting me to come to Gibb.”

_Oh._

Karolina raises her eyebrows, and suddenly Nico’s reaction makes infinitely more sense.

_Nico’s sitting outside the rink, staring off at the Debrecen architecture. It’s suffocating being stuck inside for this long, especially just to practice her long program. Especially with the pressure. It’s lonely. She wishes Amy were here._

_A voice suddenly breaks her from her trance._

_“Those are quite the jumps you have there.”_
Nico turns to see Leslie Dean towering over her.

“Excuse me?”

Leslie sits down at the table across from Nico.

“Your jumps. They’re impressive. Janet has taught you well. A little lacking in your artistry though.”

She doesn’t know Leslie that well aside from knowing that she’s tough, and, as far as Nico knows, hates her because she’s Karolina’s main source of competition on the junior ladies’ circuit.

So she’s not entirely sure what Leslie is trying to accomplish.

“Thanks?”

“I’m just saying. You clearly have a lot of potential.”

Nico rolls her eyes.

“I’m not sure 9th place is where the skating world is looking for future stars.”

Leslie appears to be studying her and smirks at Nico’s reply.

“And not satisfied with mediocrity. I like it.”

Deciding that this conversation is making her too uncomfortable to be worth whatever Leslie is trying to get at, Nico grabs her bag from the ground next to her and starts to rise from her seat.

“Look, if you’re just here to rub it in that your daughter placed higher than me in the short—”

“I’m here to make you an offer,” Leslie interrupts.

Nico sits back down.

“Come train with me in LA.”

Nico looks at Leslie as if she’s grown a second head because there’s no way that this is in any way ethical.

“Okay, yeah, I feel like this is definitely not allowed,” Nico replies, rising once again from her chair.

Leslie shrugs.

“I can’t help but identify talent when I see it.”

Nico ignores the little burst of pride in her chest at that, hides the smile itching to crack at her lips.

It’s tempting just for a second. Gibborim is huge. Chase Stein is out there. Leslie is a legend.

She’s an awful person. But she’s a coach who gets results.

But it takes all of ten seconds for Nico to decide it’s not worth the drama.

“Look, sorry, I’m happy where I’m at right now.”

Leslie also rises at this and offers a business card to Nico.
“Suit yourself. But if you ever change your mind, I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to squeeze you in.”

Nico stares at the card in Leslie’s outstretched hand but never takes it.

“I think I’m good.”

Nico walks back inside without looking back.

“Did you never hear about that?” Nico asks.

Karolina’s not sure if she should be more upset at her mother for being so unethical or for treating Nico the way she has as a whole. Or if she should be upset at Nico for not sharing this. Or somewhere in between.

“No. I had no idea.”

It doesn’t add up.

And she’s back to being angry.

“But that doesn’t make sense still. She clearly sought you out back then. She wanted you here. She made time for you when you showed up a year and a half later. Why do you think she doesn’t want you here?”

Nico sighs.

“A lot can change in the course of a few months, Karolina. You and I both know that.”

It makes sense. It makes so much sense, and maybe that’s what makes Karolina so upset about the whole thing—that Nico has a perfectly good reason to leave if she wants to.

And there’s nothing she can do to stop it.

“Well, apparently a lot can change in a few days too.”

Karolina grabs her bag and starts to make her way out of the locker room as the tears threaten to fall once again. She can’t do this right now. Why can’t this wait till after Nationals? Till after the Olympics? How about it just never has to be an issue again, and they put it all in a little box and never talk about it again?

“Karolina, come on—”

Karolina doesn’t stop all the way to her car, thankful that her mother is out on the ice and Gert is preoccupied as she marches past reception and into the parking lot.

“Why are you taking this out on me?”

Karolina turns to realize that Nico has come after her—run after her, it appears, based on the quick footfalls she had heard behind her and Nico trying to catch her breath.

Nico groans and throws her hands up in the air when Karolina doesn’t respond. Just stares at her with one hand on the driver’s side door handle.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m telling you because part of me wants you to convince me to stay?”
She so wishes that Nico would stop saying things that make her feel like she can’t breathe. Karolina grips the handle of the car door tighter.

But maybe it’s for the best that she starts pulling away now. Focuses on Nationals, on the Olympics. Let Nico invade her thoughts as little as possible.

It’s totally doable if she stays busy enough, Karolina decides. She can do it.

“We both know it doesn’t matter what I say. Because at the end of the day, you’re going to do what you want to do.”

Karolina unlocks the car and doesn’t let herself look back.

She doesn’t let herself cry until she makes it home and locks her bedroom door.

Chapter End Notes

smash that kudos and also if you’d like to support your local broke gay fic writer financially, hit me up on ko-fi at everybodyhatesjroth.
Chapter Summary

karolina gets angry. nico is very thankful for skaters' bodies. and nothing will ever be the same.

Chapter Notes

WE ARE FUCKING BACK!!!!!! this chapter is v dense and the pining is out in full force. homophobia tw because leslie is awful but karolina is an absolute gem and we love and stan forever.

okay bye now enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are lights all around town, people milling about trying to find the best deals on gifts, everyone doing their best to get in the holiday mood and pretend it's not 60 degrees and overcast with no snow in sight.

And Karolina sifts through clothing racks in a local store with Gert, trying not to think about Nico.

“So are you getting Nico anything?”

Karolina pretends she doesn’t hear Gert ask.

Pretends she hasn’t been thinking about what happened yesterday afternoon since, well, yesterday afternoon.

Tries to ignore the sharp pain that pokes her gut when she remembers the feel of opening the car door and Nico trying to stop her.

After thinking about it almost non-stop for the past twenty-four hours (even in her dreams, it doesn’t feel like she can get away), Karolina has come to the following conclusion:

She really can’t blame Nico for wanting to leave.

And maybe that’s what hurts most of all.

Maybe it’s the realization that there’s nothing keeping Nico here, that her mother is even more sinister than she had previously thought, and having to process through all of that at some point.

It hurts.

Karolina tries to ground herself feeling the different fabrics of the shirts on the racks, the music
playing in the store with much more bass than necessary, the smell of overpowering teenage perfume.

But the one question from Nico keeps tapping at the back of her mind until it breaks through to the forefront.

*Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m telling you because part of me wants you to convince me to stay?*

At this, she feels Gert tapping her shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“You know… for the holidays?”

No matter where she is—in her head or in the present moment, she can’t shake Nico.

“Oh, I… no, I don’t think so.”

It’s the desperation in Nico’s voice that surprised her the most, like she really wanted Karolina to say something, *anything*, to give her a reason to stay.

But Karolina’s just hearing things, hearing what she wants to hear.

There’s no way Nico wants her back, and she needs to accept that.

Let her go.

Move on.

Let her leave.

“You know,” Gert continues, “As much as I hate this tradition as a whole, I would kill to see you two under some mistletoe.”

Karolina grips the sleeve of a sweater and imagines strangling Gert with it.

“Hey, are you okay?” Gert finally asks.


She’s not having this conversation right now. Karolina can practically feel Gert’s anticipation radiating off of her in waves.

“You know, you said we’d revisit this whole Nico thing, and we still haven’t…”

“Can we not do this right now?”

Karolina turns toward Gert with a stern look, pleading with her to drop it.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I just don’t think it’s worth talking about. Nothing is ever going to happen between us anyway.”

Gert’s face falls, a look of confusion replacing the excitement.

“Oh.”
“What?” Karolina responds harshly.

She so wishes she could be anywhere but here.

“Nothing, I just—it’s quite a sudden change to go from being willing to admit your feelings to someone and then back to denying they ever existed.”

Karolina reaches for a shirt to hang on to but finds nothing, realizing they’ve drifted now toward the front of the store.

“I’m not denying they ever existed. I can have feelings for someone and know it’s never going to happen. Typical falling in love with the straight girl, right? It’s a basically a rite of passage anyway.”

“Karolina, you don’t—”

“I just don’t want to talk about this, Gert.”

Karolina pushes the door open and takes a deep breath of fresher, less perfume-y air. It does nothing to ground her.

“Okay then. Sorry I asked.”

Karolina tries to keep up with Gert’s ramblings about other topics—brief mentions of Chase, about Molly and how she’s reaching her stubborn and rebellious phase of adolescence, about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal.

She doesn’t mention Nico again, but still, she thinks about her.

By the time she makes it home later that evening, Karolina is buzzing with anger.

Because, really, take Leslie Dean out of the equation and things would be so much different.

(Karolina can’t decide if it’d be for better or worse.)

Because how do you possibly begin to sort through the cognitive dissonance of having a parent who has given you so much materially, given so much through opportunity, with the fact that they’re actually a bad person?

Karolina isn’t sure she’ll ever figure it out.

She’s just so angry.

Leslie, unfortunately, is seated with her father at the dinner table when she arrives home, a glass of wine cradled in her hand.

Leslie’s greeting is to put the glass down, fold her arms, and burn daggers into Karolina with her eyes.

“So, are you going to tell me what you and Nico Minoru were yelling at each other about yesterday afternoon in the locker room?”

It’s the same awful feeling in her stomach that makes Karolina want to shift out of her skin, the feeling she gets every time her mother has found out something she’s been trying to keep from her.

It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, god, it’s awful.
Karolina stumbles over a response.

“We weren’t—who even heard us?”

“Another skater complained about the noise,” Leslie responds coolly.

Leslie sits up straight and sighs, leaning forward, while her father looks down and twirls pasta around his fork.

“You better watch yourself, Karolina.”

And Karolina knows this is going to head downhill quickly.

She doesn’t bother to take a deep breath and stop herself.

“Is that a threat?”

“Watch the attitude, too.”

Fuck it.

Fuck everything.

How much worse could it get anyway?

“Guess you can blame Nico for that too since you love to make her your scapegoat for everything.”

Leslie just raises her eyebrows in mock surprise at Karolina.

“Well, hopefully by now she’s realizing she’s not particularly welcome back next season.”

And it makes something burn inside Karolina and in the same breath, realize that she’s mad at Nico for the most selfish reasons.

She can’t blame Nico for wanting to leave.

Not when Karolina’s being confronted with every reason that Nico wants to.

It almost makes Karolina question where she’d be if Leslie weren’t her mother.

“Unless she wins something of course, right?”

Leslie smirks.

“That may change things, yes.”

Karolina’s father still sits there silently, head down, while his wife and daughter continue to jab each other.

Karolina turns to him and raises her voice.

He’s such a fucking coward.

Frank Dean has sat her for twenty-some years and let Leslie get away with this shit, and Karolina can’t take it anymore.

She could use a grounding technique, use some deep breathing, but she’s done. She’s over it.
Everything bubbles over.

“Are you hearing her right now? How do you just sit there and let this slide?”

Leslie rises from her seat.

“That’s enough.”

Leslie walks around the table, and Karolina dares to take a step closer.

Leslie, to her surprise, takes a step back.

And for a moment, Karolina can understand why her mother gets so drunk on power.

“No, I’ve had enough of everyone else ignoring what you’re doing to other skaters. It’s not just Nico either, but you sure love to make her a poster child for your abuse, don’t you?”

Leslie scoffs.

“Abuse? Really?”

Her mother laughs the most derisive laugh, and Karolina leans into it.

Just this once, instead of running from it, instead of putting her head in the sand and ignoring that it exists, she’ll let it fuel her.

“Wow, she’s really done a number on you, hasn’t she?”

“Stop it.”

Karolina knows Leslie is aiming to hurt now.

But Karolina can hurt right back.

“You love having someone else to blame all the time, don’t you?”

Leslie takes another step back, and the look of shock on her mother’s face just makes her go further.

“You know, I don’t remember the last time I heard an apology from you. You always pass responsibility to someone else. Nothing can ever be your fault.”

“That is not true.”

“I’ll believe it when you stop blaming the girl with the sprained ankle for your actions.”

And she thinks about how Leslie loves to blame Nico for everything Karolina has done.

Just like she’s sure Leslie would punish Nico for Karolina being a lesbian.

“And for my actions.”

“Karolina—”

“No. I can take ownership. I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes on the ice and off it. But you keep presenting what you think is this perfect persona of me to the world all while tearing me down in private for things I’m working my ass off to make better.”
Karolina remembers asking someone when she was younger—what’s it like? Rebelling?

She remembers Nico joking with her a few weeks ago.

*Oh, and you’re the rebel now?*

It sure feels like it.

“But you know what else, mom? I’ve found that there are some parts of me that I can’t change, that I don’t want to change. And I shouldn’t have to just to appease you.”

Karolina feels like she’s reaching a critical point, like once she crosses the threshold, she won’t be able to stop the words from spilling out.

Part of her knows this is dangerous.

Part of her just wants to get it over with.

The anger is empowering, in a way.

“So sorry to shake your idealistic view of what you want me to be—the pretty, obedient girl who grows up and marries someone like Chase—but that’s never gonna happen.”

Karolina surprises herself with how easily the words come out and realizes quickly, in horror, that she can’t take them back.

It’s terrifying, because for those few seconds, Karolina lives in this liminal space of the unknown, leaning into it further than she ever has.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees her dad look up from the table, tears in his eyes. Karolina chances a look at him, like he’s pleading her to stop.

She can’t.

She owes it to herself.

She owes it to the girl who was too afraid to ever think she was okay just the way she is.

Karolina’s voice cracks as she says it.

“A daughter shouldn’t have to be afraid to tell her parents that she’s finally figured out the kind of people she wants to love.”

The dawn of realization is clear on Leslie’s face, quickly replaced by fear or dismay or some combination of things Karolina doesn’t want to think about.

Like her mother has known this about Karolina all along and has done her best to hide it, to ignore it, to pretend Karolina would never be brave enough to say it.

“Karolina, you can’t know—”

“No. I do. I’m not going to let you take that from me.”

Karolina struggles to let the words roll off her tongue explicitly—lesbian, gay, I like girls, anything. It feels too raw, too real.
She hates herself for what she feels is somehow taking the easy way out, censoring herself to somehow make this whole thing more palatable for her parents.

“Get out of my house.”

But apparently not enough.

Karolina’s senses swim out of focus when she hears it.

“What?”

“Get out.”

Her father’s weak voice breaks through the silence.

“Leslie—"

“I said leave.”

The anger is gone.

The regret sets in, the longing for what was. For something she can’t return to.

Karolina can’t take it back.

“I will see you at the rink tomorrow, but we will not be discussing this topic further.”

No words come out.

“Do I make myself clear?”

Karolina only nods because she’s pretty sure that any words she tries to make right now will just devolve into sobs. Without another word, she turns on her heel and stuffs together a duffel bag of her things, grabs her skating bag and another backpack, and goes back downstairs and out the door, numb to everything around her.

She doesn’t break down until she’s been aimlessly driving on the highway for twenty minutes, unsure of where to go.

She immediately thinks the most supportive place would be to go to the Yorkes.

But then she thinks about the sheer number of people she’ll be surrounded by—not just Gert. But also Chase, Molly, Stacy and Dale.

And Old Lace.

Which doesn’t sound very comforting.

She thinks about if she could head to a relative’s house, but her closest aunt and uncle are three hours away.

She thinks if there’s anyone else from the rink she could go to, but she worries they’ll take Leslie’s side.

Karolina thinks about where she really wants to go, and there’s really only one place that comes to mind.
At a stoplight, she types in Nico’s address into her navigation and puts herself on autopilot as it starts to rain.

//

It’s 9 o’ clock on a Thursday, two days before they leave for Nationals, when Karolina shows up at her door.

Her eyes are rimmed red and voice congested from crying, car keys dangling from her hands.

And she’s shivering, soaking wet from the storm that rages outside.

Karolina is one of the last people that Nico wants to see right now.

She’s been keeping herself from thinking about the day before with lots of sleep and a little bit of skating.

Nico wants to be mad at Karolina. Wants to stay mad at her.

But she can’t help herself and the protective instinct that overwhelms her when she sees Karolina like this.

“Karolina?” Nico asks tentatively.

The blonde wipes at her face, at both tears and raindrops, and neither Nico nor Karolina can really tell where one stops and the other ends.

“Hey,” she replies weakly.

They stay like that for a few moments, in this holding pattern, and Nico’s not entirely sure what she’s waiting for. An explanation, a sign. Something.

A loud crack of thunder makes Karolina jump and snaps Nico back to the present.

“Uh, here, come inside,” she says.

She’s really not sure what else to do.

All Nico knows is there’s a very sad, very wet Karolina Dean in her kitchen, and Nico is fighting the urge to stare at how Karolina’s shirt is clinging to her chest and making Nico feel a lot of things she doesn’t want to.

It’s all very poor timing.

Karolina wraps her arms around herself like she’s trying to hide, dripping water onto Nico’s kitchen floor.

“Let me get you a towel or something.”

And Nico all but runs out of the kitchen, leaving Karolina behind as she heads to her bedroom to find a towel as Karolina lets out a squeaky, “thank you.”
Karolina showing up unannounced—and clearly very vulnerable—does nothing to help Nico want to push her away.

(Nico knows she’s only fooling herself in thinking she wants to push Karolina away in the first place.)

Nico doesn’t want to stay, and she doesn’t want to go.

*Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m telling you because part of me wants you to convince me to stay?*

It’s one of those sentences she knows she’ll think about years from now, an embarrassing moment where she asks herself why she would say such a thing.

It’s also the most honest she’s allowed herself to be about what she feels for Karolina.

It also just happened to be said out loud. To Karolina.

(It’d be so much easier to just run away.)

Nico takes a deep breath, gripping the towel she’s grabbed tightly, and heads back to the kitchen.

Karolina is still in the exact same spot she left her, and Nico remembers that she still has no idea what has brought Karolina here.

“I know this is probably a stupid question, but are you okay?”

Karolina grips the towel and wraps herself up in it tightly.

“No,” she mumbles.

She’s never seen Karolina like this. She knows Karolina as light, as a giant sun personified, bringing joy to everyone she knows. As the posterchild of innocence on the outside with a streak of wit and sass she only saves for those close to her. Nico has seen her happy, angry, even hurt and sad.

But she’s never seen her looking absolutely defeated.

Nico has to fight the urge to hug her.

“Did something happen? Are you safe here?”

“Yes. Yeah, I’m safe. I, uh—my mom and I got into a really big fight. She kind of kicked me out.”

Karolina starts crying again and brings a hand holding a corner of the towel up to cover her face.

And Nico burns with rage knowing Leslie is the reason for this.

“I’m so sorry, Nico. I’ve just been so upset since yesterday, and I hate that she’s making you feel this awful. And I just snapped.”

Any anger that Nico has toward Karolina is gone, replaced with an anger directed entirely at Leslie Dean.

“Karolina, you—”

“I guess someone heard us yelling and told her. And she asked me about it, and—"
Karolina clamps her mouth shut and stops herself from saying something. Nico wonders what she’s thinking but lets the silence sit.

Karolina continues.

“I’m just tired of her blaming everyone else for everything.”

Nico can’t help herself. She lets out a small laugh.

Because here Nico has been, wasting all her energy trying to be mad at Karolina, and Karolina is trying to work through it by being so fucking noble.

God, they are a disaster.

“She got that mad that you defended me?”

Karolina sniffs and shifts back and forth, looking away from Nico.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly nice about it.”

Karolina fixes her eyes on a spot on the kitchen counter, looking like she’s debating what to say next.

“And that wasn’t everything.”

Nico waits, and Karolina doesn’t elaborate.

Nico doesn’t know what else to say, what else to feel, but she feels pretty terrible knowing that Leslie kicked Karolina out of the house. And that Nico is partially the cause of that.

Nico’s immediate thought, wrapped up in all her confusion about where she’ll land after this season, is to regret coming to Gibborim in the first place.

“I’m really sorry for dragging you into this. I should have never—”

“Please don’t say that.”

Karolina still doesn’t look at Nico, just stares at the counter some more, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

The air around them is charged again—with what, Nico isn’t entirely sure.

But it feels bad and awkward, and Nico needs to breathe.

“Do you want to take a shower or something? Or get into something dry?”

“No, it’s fine. I can always go somewhere else. I wouldn’t want to impose.”

It dawns on Nico that this is the first place Karolina has gone, that she was the first person Karolina thought to run to.

Nico really needs to breathe.

“You can stay here if you need to,” is what she says instead.

They’ve gone from hating each other to supporting each other, to some weird place that Nico still doesn’t want to name.
And even before the hating each other, there were just two young girls trying to remember that they just loved to skate for the sake of skating.

_Inevitable_ is the word that comes to Nico’s mind.

Karolina has always been inevitable—as long as they stay in this sport and rise through together, their paths being crossed is inevitable.

She’s been unavoidable with a whole country between them and with just a few inches apart, Karolina’s back pressed into the boards as Nico anchored herself clutching to the girl’s hips.

It’s starting to feel like whatever this is—whatever this thing is between them—is inevitable too.

“We don’t even have to talk about this. We can just—"

Karolina smiles, and then she starts laughing, covering her now-dry face with the towel again.

She sighs and finally looks at Nico.

“I was such an ass to you yesterday.”

And Nico can’t help it. She laughs too.

“Yeah, you kinda were.”

Karolina’s looking at her again like—like _that_. Like she’ll look at Nico every so often, and it nearly makes Nico forget her own name.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

Huge question.

And Nico has to take a moment to think about it herself.

“Because I—"

_Because you’ve been nice to me even when I couldn’t be nice to myself, let alone be nice to you._

_Because you’re one of the most amazing people I know._

_Because as much as I want to leave, I don’t want to lose this._

And the thought that makes Nico feel like she might throw up.

_Because I’m still not entirely sure what you’re making me feel, but I’m pretty sure it’s a more than friends kind of thing._

“You’re just—"

She can’t say it.

She can’t do that to Karolina right now.

She’s vulnerable. They both are.

And Nico files it away once again.
“I value our friendship a lot.”

(Okay, Nico kind of wants to slap herself for that one.)

But Karolina just smiles again and nods softly.

“Yeah, me too.”

Nico looks down at the floor because she’s not really sure what else to do considering she kind of wants to lean up and kiss Karolina but just said how much she values their friendship.

It’s all very confusing.

Karolina clears her throat.

“Uh, do you mind if I use that shower?”

Nico nods and rushes to get some space between her and Karolina, leading her through the bedroom and into her bathroom.

Nico closes the bedroom door behind her and leans her head against it with a heavy sigh when she hears the sound of the shower turning on.

There’s a very naked Karolina Dean just two doors away from her, and Nico realizes too late that she really should have thought this one through.

Nico does a mental recap.

In the past twenty-four hours she has realized:

1) Leslie Dean is terrible.

2) Nico is completely unsure where she’s going to end up after this skating season.

3) The reason for her struggle between numbers 1 and 2 is because she has a giant crush on Karolina.

(It’s all very confusing.)

When she finally sits down on the couch and is in a space without Karolina, Nico feels like she’s able to let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding in.

It doesn’t last long, because soon enough, Karolina emerges from the bathroom in one of Nico’s sweatshirts and—because of the height difference—shorts that are much too short on Karolina.

Surely Karolina had brought a bunch of her own clothes with her.

Nico’s brain short-circuits at the length of Karolina’s well-muscled legs, and Nico thanks whatever higher power is out there for skaters’ bodies.

“Hey.”

“Feel any better?”

“Marginally.”

Nico screams internally when Karolina comes to sit down on the other end of the couch, folding her
long legs underneath herself in such a way that somehow makes the shorts ride up even more.

This is a modern torture device. Nico is sure of it.

Karolina is playing with the strings of the sweatshirt and looking away nervously.

And Nico wonders, hopes that Karolina knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Hey, there’s something I want to tell you,” Karolina finally says.

Nico’s heart starts pounding.

She really hopes Karolina doesn’t hear how breathless Nico sounds when she replies, “Anything.”

Nico’s heart starts pounding.

She really hopes Karolina doesn’t hear how breathless Nico sounds when she replies, “Anything.”

Karolina forces her hands to still and takes a deep breath, staring straight ahead of her and away from Nico.

She says it quickly, and it makes Nico feel like her whole world has fallen off its axis.

“The reason that my mom kicked me out was because I told her I’m gay.”

And there’s just…wow… there is so much to unpack.

“She did what?”

Leslie being a bitch is the first thing she decides to focus on, solely for the reason that it makes her more angry than Nico thought humanly possible.

It has nothing to do with the fact that Karolina liking her back is a very real thing that could actually happen. Not at all.

“Wait, you’re gay?” Nico blurts out.

Karolina appears taken aback at this, and Nico quickly backpedals.

“I—Sorry, I didn’t mean to make it sound like a bad thing. That was just… a lot to process in one sentence. Not that you being gay is a lot, like in a bad way, and I’m really proud of you for standing up for yourself and that you’re telling me now—"

“Nico.”

Oh my god, I am useless.

Nico buries her head in her hands and wishes she could just disappear.

“That was like, the worst possible response wasn’t it?”

“No, I think Leslie’s was. Yours is a close second though.”

And Nico is absolutely buzzing because Karolina is close to her, somehow doesn’t hate her for her weird reaction, and then there’s the whole thing where she has Nico’s clothes on.

“God, your mom is such a bitch if she can’t see how amazing you are,” Nico blurts out.

Nico’s actually kind of glad she made the friendship comment earlier to mitigate the dreamy tone she just said that in.
Karolina giggles, and Nico knows she’s going to fall asleep tonight hearing that sound.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I mean it!”

Karolina just smiles and asks if they can turn something on on Netflix to distract her from the events of the evening.

Nico is more than happy to oblige because she too could use the distraction.

It somehow ends up that Karolina scoots even closer to her, and Nico has to stare intently at Amy Poehler as the Parks and Recreation reruns play.

Some time later, Nico feels a soft weight on her shoulder and turns to see Karolina passed out, sleeping on Nico’s shoulder.

Nico actually worries that the pace and force of her heartbeat might be enough to wake up Karolina. She lets herself stare for a few moments, at how peaceful Karolina looks in her sleep.

And then Nico shifts just a tiny bit to try and gently wake her without being too obvious.

Karolina wakes up with a sleepy smile and doesn’t say anything, doesn’t apologize for falling asleep on Nico. The two just ignore it completely as Nico turns off the TV.

“You can take the bed,” Nico says, refusing to look at Karolina. “I’ll sleep out here.”

“But—”

“It’s—”

Neither of them finish whatever they were going to say, and Nico knows she’s blushing and tries to hide her face.

Nico rises from the couch and makes a bee line for her bedroom.

“Good night, Karolina,” she calls over her shoulder.

She doesn’t hear if Karolina responds.

And then Nico nearly passes out when she walks into her bathroom and finds Karolina’s discarded clothing on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

AND I OOP
Chapter by ehj (caskettcase)

Chapter Summary

gert and chase are annoying. netflix and chill. nico is confused. and i somehow project even HARDER than the last chapter.

Chapter Notes

projection? in my fic? it's more likely than you think! (which is very likely)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karolina stays with Nico for a day and a half before Leslie calls her.

They’re leaving for San Jose in the morning, and she wants to make sure Karolina has all of her things.

They don’t talk about anything over than skating when she goes home that evening.

They don’t talk about much of anything, really.

And thank god Leslie doesn’t bother to ask where Karolina has been.

And now, in San Jose, Leslie is icing her out again while she can, preoccupied with the skaters competing at lower levels.

Karolina has finished her practice for the day (Leslie barely acknowledging her the whole time) and is truly beginning to understand why Nico wants to go somewhere else.

It doesn’t stop the confusion that comes when she remembers what Nico leaving would mean.

(And Karolina can’t bring herself to toy with the idea that, by no means is she required to stay at Gibborim.)

She’s an adult.

She could leave if she want.

But Gibborim has given her so much, even when so many people there that she loves and cares about have given her mother a platform to be the way she is.

She’s seated in the stands of the SAP Center with Gert and Chase, who have been annoyingly affectionate as of late.

It’s awful.
Gert sits with her head resting on Chase’s shoulder, and Chase has a hand resting on Gert’s thigh.

Karolina kind of wonders if they’re doing it on purpose.

Because inevitably, if Karolina asks about them, they’ll use it as a bargaining chip to talk about Nico.

And Karolina would really like to make it through Nationals first.

(Besides, Karolina isn’t even sure of what’s going on still.)

She’s watching her mother bark orders at one of the younger skaters on the practice ice when Gert finally speaks up.

“So are you going to tell us what happened, or…?”

“Gert, don’t push it,” Chase interrupts.

Karolina sends Chase a mouthed “thank you,” and they fall quiet again for a few moments.

Maybe it’s the fact that she’s having to occupy the same space as her mother, even with the distance that the large arena places between them. Maybe the thought comes to Karolina that she’ll feel better if she tells someone else before she has to get on the ice tomorrow. Maybe she just wants to rant.

But something propels her to start the conversation.

“I came out to my mom in a fit of rage.”

Karolina says it plainly, doesn’t look at Chase or Gert as she says it. She just stares straight ahead at Leslie as she coaches.

There’s silence for several seconds after, only the sounds of skaters’ blades against the ice.

Karolina sighs.

“Oh,” Chase finally says in response.

Karolina shrugs.

“She kicked me out, and I went to stay with Nico for a couple nights. Now we have to pretend everything is normal, and everything is awkward.”

She finally looks over at the two as she says it and notices how Gert’s face lights up a little when she mentions that she went to stay with Nico.

Which is entirely not the point.

“Gert, I swear to god, if you focus in on the Nico part, I will tell Chase at least two embarrassing things you’ve said to me about him.”

Chase frowns.

“There’s more than two?”

“Shut up,” Gert says to him.

The two smile softly at Karolina, trying to lighten the mood.
It doesn’t really work.

Chase must notice.

“How are you holding up?” he asks.

“Focusing on skating. I’m sure I’ll be fine for a few months and then have a complete breakdown about it.”

The two stare at her, Gert cocking her head in confusion.

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Good. Neither can I.”

“Karolina—"

“Look, we’re at Nationals. In an Olympic year. And in spite of everything, I want to enjoy it.”

She does. She should be able to enjoy it. It’s her first year at Senior. It’s her chance to qualify for the Olympics. She’s already been so successful this season and hasn’t even had time to enjoy it.

It’s just been *go go go* to the next competition.

Karolina wants to enjoy something.

Karolina wants a lot of things.

Gert and Chase stop pressing the issue, which means Karolina goes back to actively avoiding thinking about Nico, thinking about the one night she stayed at her house, how she showed up out of the blue.

How she was an idiot and left her bag in her car when she went to take a shower and had to borrow Nico’s clothes.

(It was kind of worth it to see Nico’s reaction, though.)

But then there was Nico saying how much she values their *friendship*.

They’re friends.

Nothing else.

Nothing more.

She thinks about Nico’s almost panicky response when she had come out to her. Karolina wonders if it was just out of pure shock.

(And it didn’t stop her from playing into it a little just to see what would happen.)

Part of Karolina’s mind likes to try and convince her that it’s because Nico has definitely picked up on Karolina’s crush and wants to put some distance between them now.

She doesn’t know if that’s rational.

But she can’t help it.
And then Karolina thinks about how she fell asleep on Nico’s shoulder, how she’d really like to do that more often. She wonders how long Nico let her sleep before waking her up. Did she wake her up on purpose? Did it make her uncomfortable? Was it just an accidental thing where Nico shifted a little and it happened to wake her up?

It’s too many questions and not enough answers, and over something that really, in the grand scheme of things, Karolina thinks, is quite small.

She needs to focus on skating.

It’s what Leslie would want.

(Even though she tries to pretend she doesn’t care about what Leslie thinks.)

“Hey, I’ve gotta go meet Molly for practice, but I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

Chase gives Gert a quick kiss on the forehead, and Karolina has to fight the urge to roll her eyes. Why can her friends’ love lives work out so perfectly, and hers can’t?

Gert moves over into the seat Chase has vacated.

“So Nico knows you’re—”

“Yes.”

But Karolina keeps convincing herself nothing will happen.

She ignores the fact that Nico let her into her home to stay, ignores how clearly flustered Nico was at some points, and ruminates on how Nico values their friendship.

“Like I said, nothing’s gonna happen.”

“You don’t know that,” Gert replies.

There’s also the whole issue of Nico possibly leaving.

But she can’t tell Gert that.

So Karolina bends it a little bit.

Because it’s killing her she can’t tell anyone this part.

“Leslie made it sound like she’s going to kick her out or something,” Karolina mumbles.

Karolina doesn’t notice Gert’s reaction, too busy playing with the corners of her phone case, clipping and unclipping them together.

“Not that I would blame Nico for wanting to leave,” she adds.

Objectively, no she wouldn’t.

“Have you seen Nico at all since we got here?” Gert asks.

Karolina shakes her head. They’d arrived in San Jose this morning. It’s early evening now, and she hasn’t seen Nico all day.
Probably by Leslie’s design.

But then again, Karolina can’t decide if it’s actually a good thing that she hasn’t seen Nico yet or not.

“I don’t know if I want to. Last time I saw her she told me how much she values our friendship.”

And Gert laughs. Just full on laughs. To the point where a couple of skaters on the rink below turn to face them.

Karolina sinks into her chair.

“To be quite fair, I have definitely said similar things to girls I’ve had crushes on.”

Karolina can’t decide if Gert’s just trying to make her feel better, but the way her friend had laughed seemed to come from a place of shared experience.

But Karolina won’t let herself get her hopes up.

(All of that goes out the window about two minutes later when Nico approaches them in the stands.)

She looks good, and she smiles at Karolina (and Gert, she tries to rationalize), and suddenly Karolina’s brain short-circuits again.

The dam breaks whenever Nico’s in her presence, and any trying to convince herself that she’ll never feel the same is replaced with how badly Karolina wants her.

(And that feels way better than trying and succeeding to convince herself that Nico doesn’t want her back.)

Nico takes the seat closest to the aisle, the one next to Karolina.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you two all day.”

Karolina barely cracks a smile, doesn’t say anything. She tries to mute her reactions to make it seem like she’s not at all excited to see Nico.

Turns out it just comes off as cold.

“Is everything okay?”

Karolina shrugs. Because really, no its not.

But Nico is here now.

So that’s something.

“Just filling Gert in on everything,” is the answer she settles on.

Gert nods and starts gathering up her bag and the jacket she draped on her seat.

Karolina peers up at her in confusion. She’s not about to—

“Well, and now I have to go meet Chase.”

“He just said he—"

“Nico, take this poor girl to go do something fun, okay?”
Karolina reserves glare just for Gert as the girl smiles at her, squeezing past her legs that have been draped in the aisle of the row they sit in. Gert waves goodbye to them both with a saccharine smile, and oh, Karolina is going to—

“That was abrupt,” Nico observes.

Karolina doesn’t have long to pull herself together and just shrugs, settling on neutral response.

“Guess we’re all in kind of weird moods today.”

Nico doesn’t sit down and turns toward the rink, staring down at Leslie and her skaters.

She turns back to Karolina and smiles.

“You done skating for the day?”

“Yeah, are you?”

Nico reaches out a hand to her, and Karolina stares at it like it’s a trap.

Nico I value our friendship Minoru doesn’t seem to be shying away from her after Karolina came out. After she fell asleep on Nico’s shoulder.

This has to be a good sign, right?

(Why can’t Gert be around in these situations to give her advice in real time?)

“Come on. Come with me.”

Karolina starts to automatically protest, tries to come up with a reason why she can’t, why she shouldn’t.

Usually its, “I can’t hang out. I have skating.”

It doesn’t hold up in this situation.

And why is she trying to get out of hanging out with Nico?

(She’s afraid she’ll embarrass herself again.)

A counter question pops into Karolina’s head out of the blue.

What would you do if you weren’t afraid?

Karolina has let fear and what would other people think rule her forever.

So she grabs Nico’s hand.

“Where are we going?”

“To unwind.”

Nico pulls her up and hangs on to her hand all the way down the stairs of the arena.

She doesn’t let go until they make it into the hotel lobby a few blocks away, and Karolina’s grateful for the time to recompose herself, because if Nico had let go any sooner, Karolina is certain she would have floated away.
She follows Nico to her hotel room with a pounding heart and a hand that’s just been in Nico’s for the past twenty minutes.

Fuck Nationals.

This is the most exciting thing to happen to Karolina all year.

Nico hands Karolina a room service menu and asks, “What are you hungry for?” before pressing a button on the remote to bring up her Netflix account.

“So this is your go-to way of calming me down? Netflix?” Karolina quips.

Nico flops down on the queen-sized bed and pats the spot next to her.

“Shhhhh.”

Karolina’s pretty sure she’s blushing. She might even pass out. But Nico is being playful and sweet and exactly the opposite of what she worried, and nothing else really matters.

“And it seems to be 2-for-2, so yeah.”

Karolina lists off a couple of things from the menu as Nico calls down to order their food, and she settles in beside Nico on the bed.

Karolina turns to her.

“Thank you.”

Nico turns back, and suddenly their faces are inches apart again, and Karolina wonders again:

*What would you do if you weren’t afraid?*

And she knows.

But she’s not going to do that yet.

“I hope this is helping,” Nico replies.

Karolina smiles and nods, forcing her gaze not to fall on Nico’s lips.

She barely succeeds, but suddenly Netflix springs to life and a trailer for a new movie starts auto-playing.

Thank God.

//

Nico can do well at keeping Karolina out of her head most of the time.

But now, on the ice, as she glides around, throwing jump after jump perfectly, feeling most like herself—

She can’t stop thinking about her.
Even with Leslie (who has magically started paying more attention to her) yelling at her to clean up this entry and watch for under-rotations on her lutz.

The short program is tomorrow, her first of two chances to perform well enough to podium and hopefully head to the Olympics, and all she can think about is Karolina.

Much to Nico’s surprise (and joy), it doesn’t cause her skating to suffer.

If anything, it seems to help.

So she keeps thinking of Karolina, of impulsively reaching out to hold her hand the day before, of every near miss they’ve had lately.

She tries not to think about what she’s doing after this season because she’s honestly still unsure.

Nico hopes for some sort of catalyst for her decision that doesn’t seem willing to come. Every time she’s away from Karolina, she’s able to think about what life would be like removed from this place. It might be better. She might be able to spend more time getting to know herself. She might even get better as a skater.

But every time Karolina comes around and gives her a rush of endorphins, and Nico remembers just how good Karolina is, how important she is—and by extension, how important Chase, Molly, and Gert are, she’s right back where she started.

Nico feels like a ping pong ball going back and forth.

She thinks of Leslie (and her apparent homophobia). She wants to leave.

She thinks of Karolina. She wants to stay.

She thinks of starting in a third location that’s not Boston or LA. She wants to leave.

She thinks of what she’s built here at Gibborim. She wants to stay.

It’s all very confusing.

She keeps waiting for the catalyst.

Maybe it’ll come.

Or maybe she’ll have to make a decision based on the information she has right now.

Nico thinks about this still—thinks she’s thought it all to death—when she’s back in her hotel room that night.

It’s about nine o’clock at night when there’s a knock on the door.

Nico’s heart skips a beat when she opens it to see Karolina.

As if thinking about her has somehow forced her to materialize.

Nico kind of wishes the blonde had just stayed in her head.

(Because now she actually has to deal with things.)

“Hey,” Karolina says simply.
“What brings you by at this hour?”

Karolina smiles softly and just shrugs, like she doesn’t quite know what she’s doing to Nico but has a faint idea.

It’s so unfair.

“Just checking in. Tomorrow’s a big day.”

Nico laughs and steps out of the doorway, allowing her in.

“For you and me both.”

“How’s your ankle been?”

“Really good. Hope it stays that way.”

And it has been. Once Leslie had seen earlier in the week that Nico’s ankle was having no impact on cleanly landing her triple axel, it was back to business as usual.

As if the woman hadn’t been basically ignoring her for the past six weeks.

Maybe Leslie needed a distraction herself from thinking about what a bitch she’d been to her daughter.

Speaking of—

“How are you doing?”

Nico sits down on her bed, while Karolina leans against the wall.

She shrugs.

“Putting on a brave face. For now.”

She says it sadly, but this is Karolina, always looking out for others. So it doesn’t surprise Nico when she replies:

“But I suppose you understand that feeling too.”

And yeah, Nico kind of does. Because Leslie suddenly paying attention to her again, but also the fact that Leslie is treating Karolina the way she is, makes things complicated.

Makes thinking about next season complicated.

And Nico knows that’s what Karolina is referring to.

“I don’t want to think about next season right now.”

Karolina nods but asks anyway, “Do you know what you’ll do once the season is over?”

Nico shakes her head and falls back on the bed, fully laying out with her arms spread wide.

She has no idea.

The catalyst hasn’t come.
And it might not at all.

“Let’s see how this little competition goes first,” she says instead.

Karolina smirks at this, and the two fall silent for a few minutes. Nico closes her eyes and pretends she can’t feel Karolina’s eyes on her, pretends she can’t hear the absence of Karolina checking her phone or walking around or doing anything that would indicate that she’s doing anything other than watching Nico.

It makes her feel vulnerable.

Karolina has a way of doing that to her.

After a few more moments, Nico hears footsteps, then feels the bed dip beside her. She cracks an eye open to see Karolina laying beside her, eyes closed.

They stay like that for what feels like hours.

In reality, it’s probably all of ten minutes or less.

It’s Karolina who breaks the silence.

“I wish I was more like you.”

And Nico nearly laughs because—no? Why would she say that?

So she asks.

Nico opens her eyes and asks.

“What? Where is this coming from?”

Karolina shifts so she’s sitting up, and looking down at Nico from what should be an entirely unflattering angle, she still looks perfect somehow.

Why would she want to be more like me?

But Karolina shrugs and explains.

“I wish I was braver, more rebellious. I wish I’d enjoyed skating more growing up. Not just the actual skating but the people too.”

And oh, Nico can’t let that go unchallenged. Nico sits up and mirrors her, sitting cross-legged on the bed, utterly confused why Karolina thinks Nico is brave.

Nico is the one sitting here, still entirely unsure of what to do with her life, entirely terrified of further processing what her feelings for Karolina might mean.

Karolina is the brave one.

“You stood up to your mom. You told off someone who no one else has been willing to confront. That’s badass.”

“And I got kicked out for it.”

Nico laughs and throws up her arms.
“So? You did it, despite the possible outcomes. That’s brave.”

Karolina seems to consider this for a moment, staring back at Nico, almost challenging. And then she shakes her head.

“I wish I’d gotten less sleep and stayed out more and… done more.”

Nico wishes she could tell Karolina that none of that—none of Nico’s attempts at adding excitement to their mundane yet rigorous skating schedules growing up—compares to any of this.

None of it compares to Karolina.

“Drinking cheap vodka at 16 while Alex Wilder tries to get to second base is not as exciting as it sounds.”

The mention of Alex seems to strike a nerve for Karolina, and Nico can see her visibly wince as she calls back to the memory and remembers how Karolina walked in on Alex and Nico making out just a year ago.

Nico won’t admit that she brought it up entirely on purpose to see Karolina’s reaction.

It’s a dirty move maybe, but it’s the only way Nico knows how to play this game.

Karolina groans and rubs her eyes, clearly trying to hide the way her face goes red at that.

“Can we please forget you just said that?”

Nico can’t control the next thing that comes out of her mouth.

She has the upper hand now.

It comes naturally.

“What, are you jealous?”

Karolina’s hands still, and then drop. And Nico mostly met it flirtatiously, but Karolina just seems even more embarrassed now, her mouth gaping open and closed in panic.

And Nico panics too.

“I mean—it was a joke.”

Karolina doesn’t look Nico in the eyes when she answers.

“I just mean I wish I’d been more willing to do what I wanted.”

And Nico could scream because Karolina clearly—especially based on their current conversation—really has no idea.

Karolina makes Nico want.

And Nico’s been holding her foot on the brake pedal for want.

Nico doesn’t respond right away.

She waits for Karolina to finally look up at her again, and Nico begs, pleads, wills Karolina to understand when she finally answers.
“I don’t do that.”

Karolina doesn’t seem to get it.

“You moved across the country to switch rinks. You chose and choreographed a program you wanted.”

Karolina smiles and shakes her head at Nico, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Like Nico is the one who’s wrong.

“You’re considering leaving because at the end of it all, you want what’s best for you.”

Somehow she gets it.

And somehow, she still doesn’t.

“You go for the things you want, Nico.”

Nico feels like the brake lines cut.

Sitting this close to Karolina, not being able to touch her, not being able to get her to get it.

It’s torture.

It’s not fair.

Nico is full speed ahead down a steep hill as her eyes very obviously flicker down from Karolina’s blue eyes to her lips and speaks directly to them.

“You’d be surprised how much I hold back from then.”

Nico chances a look up at Karolina, whose lips are slightly parted, whose eyes are suddenly much darker than they were a couple minutes ago.

Nico doesn’t stop.

“Besides, I don’t want you to be like anyone else. You’re—”

You’re you. You’re Karolina.

Nico struggles for words to try and make her see it.

“Your light… the light inside you. That warmth, that openness—that’s everything I like about you. That’s what makes you who you are.”

And with that, Nico seems to have pulled Karolina into her orbit, the girl slowly gravitating toward her.

They’re so close that Nico can hear and feel the way her breath hitches.

Nico’s blowing through stoplights and hitting the gas.

Nico wants.

Barely above a whisper, barely with a voice at all, Karolina answers her.

“If you keep looking me at like that—"
Karolina can’t even finish, and god, it’s intoxicating how she can have such an obvious effect on Karolina.

Nico starts to bring a shaking hand up to cup Karolina’s face.

*Don’t think too much don’t think too much don’t think too much*

Nico lets herself want.

Until the feeling of Nico’s hand cupping Karolina’s jaw falls in time with the sound of the hotel room door swinging open.

They spring apart, and Nico jumps so quickly that she actually falls into Karolina and knocks her forehead against hers. And then jumps back even further and howls in pain.

And then proceeds to tumble off the bed.

When she finally rises, a hand pressed to her forehead, Nico sees a stunned Molly standing next to the other bed.

“Oh! Hi!”

Molly quickly backpedals out of the room.

“I—Wow, well. Look at that. I’ll just be… you all have fun now!”

And as quickly as she came, the younger girl is gone again.

Nico can’t even bring herself to look at Karolina.

All she hears is the sound of the bed creaking and feet hitting the floor.

Karolina mumbles something to the effect of “I should get going. It’s late,” but Nico can’t even process it.

Because when Karolina leaves, she takes all the air in the room with her.

Chapter End Notes

shoutout to the little canon dialogue appearance at the end. also smash that mf kudos button for those people you wanna be around because of The Serotonin you get. we feel you both, ladies!

End Notes

our tumblrs are everybodyhatesjroth and longlivetheheda. most people there know by our ship name #caliza.
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