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opening extract from

Skate School 1: Ice Princess

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Frankie Wills just couldn't resist. Slowly, she reached out of bed and patted the velvety darkness until she found what she was looking for – her trusty holdall. She pulled back the zip, smiling as the metallic growl clattered noisily. Then she tucked her hand inside, running her fingertips over the cracked leather and the cold metal blades. Frankie sighed happily. Her precious ice-skating boots. She *never* tired of them – just a single touch was enough to whisk her away into a dreamy world where everything was calm, silky-smooth and totally magical—

Beep-beep-beep!

Quickly, she silenced the alarm with a deft karate chop and sprang out of bed. It was 5.30 a.m. Time to get ready.

As usual, she and Dad – after eight years, it felt just about okay to call him that – left the house at 6.30 a.m., far too early for conversation as far as either of them was concerned. London was just waking up, night-shift workers still on their way home, traffic jams still to come.

They walked through semi-deserted streets towards the bus station, where they hopped on board the slightly musty 48. Dad settled himself into the driver's seat and wriggled around until he was comfortable, before clicking shut the door of his cocoon and

grasping the huge steering wheel with both hands. He'd been a bus driver since long before he married Frankie's mum. That's how they'd met. Mum had sprayed a purseful of change across the bus floor, while attempting to keep control of two squabbling children – Frankie and her brother Josh. Years later, after stubbornly avoiding promotion – why would he want to push a pen when he could drive a red double-decker? – Dad was still a bus driver. And despite the perspex barrier that now separated him from the passengers, he loved it.

Every day but Sunday, Frankie went with him. Not because she was an anorak-wearing bus-spotter, but because Dad dropped her off on his way, making the tiniest of detours to Lee Valley Ice Rink. Dad's bosses turned a blind eye – to them, she was little Frankie Wills, a sweet girl who wouldn't dare to stick chewing gum under the seats or backchat the driver. Except she'd been riding the 48 for so long now that she was no longer a sweet little girl. She was a fourteen-year-old ice princess.

Well, that's what she liked to dream.

This morning began like any other morning. By 7.15 a.m., she was at the rink, her blades carving graceful curves on the brand-new ice. The place was pretty much empty, apart from the caretaker and the odd early-bird skater. She didn't notice anyone else. But that wasn't surprising. Once she was skating, Frankie

wouldn’t notice if her entire family dressed in kilts and danced the Highland fling. Everything outside the barrier became a meaningless blur.

Then, at 8.15 a.m., it was on to school. Lessons next. Maths. English lit. It had all the hallmarks of a Normal Day.

It was at 4 p.m. that everything turned upside down.

Frankie arrived home to find the house silent. That was strange in itself. Usually, the noise would hit her like a giant fist – wailing in stereo from her twin baby sisters, accompanied by deafening rap music from upstairs.

“Is that you, Francesca?” said Mum. “We’re through here, darling.”

Frankie was really puzzled now. *Darling?* Yes. *Francesca?* No, no, no. She was never called that, not unless she’d spilled nail varnish on the dressing table or turned a white wash pink. She thought quickly. No, her conscience was just about clear. *So what was going on?*

Pausing only to kick off her shoes by the front door, she hurried through to the kitchen. Mum and Dad were sitting at the table, each one balancing a twin baby girl on their lap. All four of them were staring goggle-eyed at the visitor.

“Er…hi,” mumbled Frankie, when it became clear that no one had noticed her standing in the doorway.

“Darling!” said Mum, a toothpaste smile lighting up her face. “This is…” She paused. “I’m so sorry. How did you pronounce your name?”

The visitor nodded understandingly, as if she was used to having this amnesiac effect on people. “Madame Kristiana von Berne,” she replied, getting to her feet. She extended perfectly manicured fingers towards Frankie, who fleetingly wondered why the name von Berne was so familiar, before grasping and shaking, wishing desperately that she’d wiped her own very sweaty hand on her skirt first.

The handshake was cool and firm, just like the visitor. Madame Kristiana von Berne smiled briefly, the movement causing barely a ripple on her perfectly made-up face. She was too striking to be beautiful, with dark eyebrows arching over icy-blue irises and scarlet, pouty lips that revealed film-star teeth. Her expensive outfit – tweed suit and skyscraper heels – would not have looked out of place on a Parisian catwalk. And she was *tiny*. Frankie, who was neither tall nor short, felt like a giant beside her. Quickly, she sat down and the visitor did the same, facing her across the scratched, wooden table.

“Madame von Berne watched you skate this morning,” said Dad, beaming with pride. “She’s an ice skater too. She thought you were good.”

“I thought she skated well,” corrected Madame von Berne. “For a beginner,” she added, turning to Frankie. “How long have you been training?”

“Training?” repeated Frankie. She wasn’t sure that messing about on the ice counted as *training*. Didn’t you have to have a coach for that? “I’ve been skating for seven years,” she replied, feeling incredibly nervous all of a sudden. “I don’t really know what I’m doing. I just pick it up from the TV…” Her voice petered out. It sounded so *lame*.

“She never misses an episode of *Dancing on Ice*,” Mum said helpfully. “That’s where she picked up the…what was it called…? Triple Salchow
scissor-flip!” she finished with a smile.

“And the double loophole,” added Dad.

Frankie cringed. Her parents had a peculiar knack for inventing impossible new moves. It never bothered her usually. But they didn’t usually have an actual ice skater in the kitchen – which reminded her… Why was this woman here? Had she made a special trip just to tell Frankie that she skated “well”?

Madame von Berne seemed to sense the unspoken questions. “I’m sorry to appear unannounced,” she said to Frankie’s parents with the awkward manner of someone who doesn’t apologize very often. “It’s not standard procedure at all. I’m afraid I tracked your

daughter down via the ice rink – I hope you don’t mind.” She carefully smoothed her hair and turned to Frankie. “Let me introduce myself properly,” she said. “I am Team GB’s junior figure-skating coaching director, which means that it’s my role to find and train future Olympic champions.”