

I SKATED TO

center ice, set my toe pick to anchor me to the spot, and posed in the opening attitude of my program—hands on hips, eyes tilted up to look at the hockey banners hanging from the ice arena's grimy ceiling. I smiled playfully as part of the choreography of my program, but I didn't have to fake a smile today.

I felt it!

Not the eyes of my skating friends as they leaned on the rail of the bleachers above me. Not the eyes of my dads as they pretended not to be concerned. And certainly not the eyes of the judges wrapped in fleece in the hockey box across from me, looking like they'd run screaming for the hills if they heard the soundtrack to *Annie* one more time.

What I felt was the power of certainty. Today was the day I was going to skate a clean freestyle program for the first time in a

THE HUMAN ZAMBONI

by Jennifer Sneed



year. Today was the day I was going to land the axel in competition. Today was the day I was NOT skating to *Annie*.

“You’ve got this, Harper,” my friend Caleb yelled from the bleachers. My other friends held up crossed fingers and blew me kisses. They didn’t look so sure.

My dads whistled. One yelled, “You look beautiful, Beautiful,” admiring the sparkly competition dress he’d bought to give me “more confidence.”

I can do this! I thought as my music swelled. It wavered slightly because of the janky sound system echoing in the cavernous arena, but as long as the tempo

was right, I’d be A-OK. I started my program with a circular step sequence and a megawatt smile, followed by a beautiful combination spin if I do say so myself. Flying camel, sit spin, layback spin. Perfection, leading up to my nemesis. The jump! The axel!

A TOE PICK IS THE JAGGED BIT AT THE FRONT OF AN ICE SKATING BLADE, FOR GRIPPING THE ICE.



JANKY IS ANOTHER WORD FOR RUN-DOWN, SHODDY, LOW-QUALITY. A NEMESIS IS YOUR ARCHENEMY.

Illustrated by Noa Kelner

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A ZAMBONI IS A MACHINE USED TO SMOOTH AND RESURFACE THE ICE.





I could do it when I practiced off-ice, but I'd only landed it on-ice approximately fourteen times in my entire life. And I'd been working on it forever, which is NOT an exaggeration! I'd leave it out if I could, but my Olympic dreams hinged on it. My coach, Geena, put it early in my program so I could do it while my legs were fresh.

I was on the right back outside edge of my skate blade, ready to turn forward and launch into the axel. The butterflies in my stomach were back, working against me, making me feel like I needed to barf. You stinkin' butterflies, I thought, I can do this!

I stepped into takeoff and I did . . . a waltz jump. A jump I'd been doing since I was about six years old. Only one-half a

rotation instead of the one and one-half that I need for the axel.

I heard my friends' groans from upstairs, imagined the disappointed looks on my dad's faces, glimpsed Coach Geena's questioning eyebrow as I glided past the door. It's not over, I telegraphed to them all, don't be disappointed.

I could fix this. I'd just replace the next jump with the axel.

It didn't work out the way I'd hoped. I fell, and I kept falling. Never one to give up, I replaced every jump in my program with the axel, but I didn't land one. I spent so much time literally on the ice that it's like I was a human Zamboni making sure the ice was clean for the next skater. The two minutes, fifteen seconds of my program felt like an eon. By the time I was done, my consolation-

THE FLYING CAMEL IS A GRACEFUL ICE-SKATING MOVE.



ON ONE LEG WITH THE OTHER LEG RAISED PARALLEL TO THE ICE. LIKE THIS... SORTA.

MORE LIKE THIS, ACTUALLY.



SMOOTH MOVE, SLUGGO!





prize dress was soaked through and I was seven seconds behind my music, so I finished skating to silence.

It was the most humiliating moment of my life.

The silence continued as I skated toward the exit, where my coach stood holding my skate guards. Everyone in the arena was looking at me but trying not to look at me. I guess it was like watching a car wreck—you can't look away.

The next skater in my event, a cute little eight-year-old named Marlo, glided past me to take her place center ice. What am I doing here? I thought. You've got to admit your skating career has hit a snag when your competition is nearly five years younger than you are.

Coach Geena handed me the skate guards and draped my sweater across my shoulders. "Making up your own choreography now, are you?"

It was her gentle way of asking what happened out on the ice, but the only answer I could think of is that I'm a terrible skater. It didn't seem like a constructive comment, so I just shrugged.

As I walked upstairs to join the dads in the bleachers, I heard the *oohs* and *aahs* of the audience as Marlo

skated her program. I didn't look. I passed some tiny Snowplow Sam level kids, probably five years old, with medals around their necks. I won medals when I was that age, too. It seemed easy then. Fun.

I snuggled between the dads, and they gave me hugs and the kind of reassuring comments parents are wired to give.

My friends were embarrassed for me. I could tell because they couldn't look me in the eye. I saw them huddled together downstairs, probably talking about me—Harper, the Human Zamboni. Everyone except Caleb,



that is. He brought me a sorry-you-crashed-and-burned hot chocolate, but then he had to rush off to skate his own program, which has a double axel and about a million other doubles.

Caleb and I are the same age, I should add.

I wanted to go home, but the dads said it's poor sportsmanship to leave before the results from my event were posted. So, we waited until the white piece of copy paper was taped crookedly to the wall. Sure enough, not only did I not win a medal, I ranked last. I high-fived Marlo and told her she skated a great program, which was NOT a lie, then I pulled the dads away from conversation and to the front doors.

That night, after I'd washed off all the makeup and hair gel I wear for competition, I plopped down on the sofa and picked up the remote.

"Harper, it's eight o'clock. Time for bed," Daddy Dan said.

"I'm the only almost thirteen-year-old at school who has to go to bed at eight."

"And probably the only one who has to be on the ice at five-thirty in the morning to practice."

"About that. I'm not going," I said.

"What? Why?"

"Let's just say, I'm exploring my options."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Maybe I'd rather be a . . . concert pianist," I said, uttering the first thing that popped into my mind.

"But you don't play the piano."

"I can learn."

Daddy Jon, figuring this could probably go on forever, interrupted. "It's OK. One missed practice won't hurt."

I didn't go to bed until ten o'clock!

At 5:20 the next morning I got a text.

CALEB: Where are you?

ME: WAS asleep.

CALEB: Sick?

ME: No.

CALEB: Didn't see you after my program.

ME: Went home early. How'd you do?

CALEB: Gold.

ME: Figures.

I went back to sleep.

I spent an entire week exploring my options. I looked around at school to see what activities were offered, and I looked online, but everything paled in comparison to skating.

Finally, Daddy Jon asked if, after all my considering, I'd come to any conclusions.

"Not really," I answered. "Some things seem OK, but not as much fun as skating. And most activities seem to offer as many chances to humiliate myself as skating does."

He laughed. "That's basically life. When you put yourself out there, the chances of making mistakes are high."

"Well, that's encouraging!"

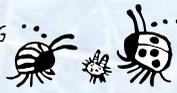
"But true, so you may as well do what you love, and you've always loved skating."

"I do. The speed, the cold, the feel of my blade as it cuts into the ice, making wind . . ."

"Making wind?" he snickered.

"Ha-ha! Very funny! But I love the feel of the wind as I zoom around the rink. I love everything about skating except the axel—

SEE? YOU SHOULD DO WHAT YOU LOVE, BECAUSE YOU LOVE IT! BEING "THE BEST" IS NOT THE POINT.



ALSO BECAUSE I'M THE BEST... AND NOT EVERYONE CAN BE ME, OBVIOUSLY.

and being embarrassed that I can't do it. But I'll never get to the Olympics without it."

"Maybe the Olympics isn't the goal. Maybe you skate just because you love it."

"But how will I face everyone at the rink?"

"They've had setbacks, too. It happens to everyone."

It always pains me to admit my parents are actually smart, but he had a point.

The next morning, when I stepped through the doors of the ice arena, I breathed in the familiar smell: biting cold, dampness, and just a hint of mildew. Ah! It was good to be back.

Some of my friends were sitting on the bench lacing up their skates and others were clustered around the door to the rink, wait-

ing for the Zamboni to make a pass around the ice before they could get on. Every one of them shouted my name and gave me a hug or a high-five. Nobody mentioned my disastrous program.

"I'm glad you're back," said Caleb. "It's been boring without you."

"Thanks. It was boring being away. Besides, I figured I had to come back. The rink needs me. If the Zamboni breaks, I can fill in for it."

Everyone laughed. I laughed. It was a pretty good joke, after all. And when I stepped on the ice again and stroked around the perimeter, feeling the wind on my face, I knew I was in the right place. 

