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By Mariana Zapata

Under Locke
Kulti
Lingus
Rhythm, Chord & Malykhin
The Wall of Winnipeg and Me
Wait for It
Dear Aaron
From Lukov with Love
Luna and the Lie
The Best Thing
Hands Down
All Rhodes Lead Here

FROM LUKOV MARIANA ZAPATA WITH LOVE



HEADLINE
ETERNAL

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*To my best friend and the best person I know,
My mom
The real chingona.*

Chapter One

Winter/Spring 2016

By the time I'd busted my ass five times in a row, I figured it was time to call it quits.

At least for the day.

My butt cheeks could handle another two hours' worth of falls tomorrow. They might have to if I didn't figure out what I was doing wrong, damn it. This was the second day in a row I hadn't been able to land a damn jump.

Rolling over onto the cheek I'd fallen on the least amount of times, I blew out a breath of frustration, managed to keep the "son of a bitch" I really wanted to scream inside my mouth, and tilted my head all the way back to make faces at the ceiling, figuring out almost immediately that decision was a fucking mistake. Because I knew what was hanging from the ceiling of the dome-shaped facility. For the most part, it was the same thing I'd been seeing for the last thirteen years.

Banners.

Banners hanging from the rafters.

Banners with the same jackass's name on all of them.

IVAN LUKOV. IVAN LUKOV. IVAN LUKOV.

And more IVAN LUKOV.

There were other names on there right alongside his—the

other miserable souls he'd partnered up with over the years—but it was his that stood out. Not because his last name was the same last name as one of my favorite people in the world, but because his first name reminded me of Satan. I was pretty sure his parents had adopted him straight out of Hell.

But at that moment, nothing else mattered but those hanging tapestries.

Five different blue banners proclaiming each of the national championships he'd won. Two red banners for every world championship. Two butter yellow banners for every gold medal. One silver banner to commemorate the single silver medal for a world championship sitting in the trophy case at the entrance to the facility.

Ugh. Overachiever. Ass. Jerk.

And thank fuck there weren't banners for every Cup or other competition he'd won along the years too, otherwise the entire ceiling would have been covered in colors, and I would have been throwing up daily.

All these banners . . . and none of them had my name on them. Not one single one. No matter how hard I had tried, how hard I had trained, nothing. Because no one ever remembers second place, unless you're Ivan Lukov. And I was no Ivan.

Jealousy I had no right to feel, but couldn't exactly ignore, pierced right through my sternum, and I hated it. *I fucking hated it.* Worrying about what other people were doing was a waste of time and energy; I'd learned that as a kid when other girls had nicer costumes and newer skates than me. Being jealous and bitter was what people who didn't have anything better to do, did. I knew that. No one did anything with their lives if they spent it comparing themselves to other people. I knew that too.

And I never wanted to be that person. Especially not over that jackass. I'd take my three seconds of jealousy shit to the

grave with me before I ever told anyone what those banners did to me.

It was with that reminder that I rolled onto my knees to quit looking at those stupid-ass pieces of cloth.

Slapping my hands on the ice, I grunted as I got my feet under me—balancing on my blades was second nature—and finally got up. *Again.* For the fifth fucking time in less than fifteen minutes. My left hip bone, butt cheek, and thigh were aching, and they were only going to hurt worse tomorrow.

"Fucking shit," I muttered under my breath so that none of the younger girls skating around me would hear. The last thing I needed was for one of them to tell on me to management. *Again.* Little snitches. Like they didn't hear the f-bomb watching television, walking down the street, or going to school.

Brushing off the ice coating my side from my last fall, I took a steadying breath and reeled in the frustration flaring through my body at everything—at myself, my body, my situation, my life, the other girls I couldn't fucking curse around—at today in general. From waking up late to not being able to land a jump that morning either, to spilling coffee down my shirt at work *twice*, opening my car door and having it almost break my kneecap, and then this second session of shitty training . . .

It was easy to forget that in the grand scheme of life, not being able to land a jump I'd been doing for ten years didn't mean anything. It was just an off day. *Another* off day. It wasn't unheard of. There was always something worse that could and *would* happen, someday, sometime. It was easy to take things for granted when you thought you had everything.

But it was when you started taking the most basic things for granted that life decided to teach you that you're an ungrateful idiot.

And today, the thing I was taking for granted was landing

triple Salchows, a jump I'd been doing for years. They weren't the easiest jump in figure skating—the jump consisted of three rotations that started while skating backward on the back inside edge of the blade of your skate before takeoff, and then required a landing on the back outside edge of the blade of the opposite foot you took off from—but it definitely wasn't anywhere near being the hardest. Under normal circumstances, they were second nature to me.

But not today or yesterday apparently.

Scrubbing my eyelids with the backs of my hands, I took a deep breath in and let another slow one out, rolling my shoulders in the process and telling myself I needed to calm down and just go home. There was always tomorrow.

And it wasn't like I was going to be competing anytime soon, the practical but asshole part of my brain reminded me.

Just like it did every single time I thought about that awesome fact, my stomach clenched in pure anger . . . and something that felt awfully close to despair.

And just like every time it happened, I shoved both those emotions way, way, *way* down, so far down I couldn't see them or touch them or smell them. *They were pointless.* I knew that. Absolutely pointless.

I wasn't giving up.

With another inhale and exhale as I subconsciously rubbed the ass cheek hurting the worst for forgiveness, I looked around the rink one last time for the day. Taking in the girls so much younger than me, still taking advantage of the session going on at the moment, I held back a frown. There were three that were about my age, but the others were all in their teens. Maybe they weren't that good—at least not as good as I'd been at their ages—but still. *They had their entire lives ahead of them.* Only in figure skating, and maybe gymnastics, could you be considered ancient at twenty-six years old.

Yeah, I needed to get home and lay on the couch with some television to get over this shit day. Nothing good ever came out of me throwing my own ass a pity party. Nothing.

It didn't take more than a couple of seconds to weave my way through and around the other people on the ice, paying just enough attention to not crash into anyone before making it to the short wall surrounding the rink. In the same place I'd always left my skate guards, I grabbed the pieces of plastic and slipped them over the four-millimeter-wide blades attached to my white boots right before stepping onto solid ground.

I tried to ignore that tight feeling bubbling around in my chest that was more than likely mostly frustration at falling so much today, but maybe wasn't.

I wasn't about to believe my chances were high that I was wasting my time still hitting the Lukov Ice and Sports Complex twice a day to work out, in hopes of someday competing again, because the idea of just giving up seemed like a total waste of the last sixteen years of my life. Like I hadn't basically given up my childhood for nothing. Like I hadn't sacrificed relationships and normal human experiences for a dream I'd had that had once been so huge, nothing and no one could have taken it away from me.

Like my dream of winning a gold medal . . . of at least winning a world championship, even a national championship . . . hadn't been broken down into tiny, confetti-sized pieces that I was still clinging onto even though some part of me realized all it did was hurt me more than help me.

Nope.

It wasn't any of those ideas and possibilities that made my stomach hurt almost daily and made me nauseous right then and there.

I needed to chill out. Or maybe masturbate. Something had to help.

Shaking off that crappy feeling in my gut, I made my way around the rink and continued on down the hall that led toward the changing rooms, taking in the crowd. There were already parents and kids hanging around the rink, getting ready for evening classes; the same classes I'd started with at nine years old before moving on to small groups and then private lessons with Galina. The good old days.

I kept my head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone and kept on going, passing other people who went out of their way to avoid my gaze too. But it wasn't until I was going down the hall toward where my things were, that I spotted a group of four teenage girls standing around, pretending to stretch. Pretending because you couldn't get a proper stretch in if you were busy running your mouth.

At least that's what I'd been taught.

"Hi, Jasmine!" one of them greeted, a nice girl who, as far as I could remember, had always gone out of her way to be friendly to me.

"Hi, Jasmine," the girl beside her said too.

I couldn't help but nod at them, even as I counted down the time it would take me to go home, either make something to eat or microwave something my mom had made, and probably sit on my ass and watch TV. Maybe if practice had gone better, I'd want to do something else, like go for a run or even go to my sister's house, but . . . it wasn't going to happen.

"Have a good practice," I mumbled at the two friendly girls, flashing a glance at the other two standing across from them, silently. They looked familiar. There was a class for intermediate skaters starting soon that I figured they were enrolled in. I had no reason to pay attention to them.

"Thanks, you too!" the first girl who had talked to me squawked out before slamming her mouth closed and turning a shade of red I'd only seen on one person in the past: my sister.

The smile that came over my mouth was genuine and unexpected—because the girl made me think of Squirt—and I dug my shoulder into the swinging door of the changing room. I'd barely taken a step in, shoulder still holding the door open, when I heard, "I don't know why you get so excited seeing her. She might have been a good singles skater, but she always choked, and her pairs career was nothing to talk about."

And . . . I stopped. Right there. Halfway in the door. And I did something I knew was a bad idea: I listened.

Eavesdropping never worked out for anybody, but I did it anyway.

"Mary McDonald is a better pairs skater—"

They went there.

Breathe, Jasmine. Breathe. Shut up and breathe. Think about what you're going to say. Think about how far you've come. Think about—

"—otherwise, Paul wouldn't have teamed up with her this last season," the girl finished.

Assault was against the law. But was it extra illegal to hit a teenager?

Breathe. Think. Be nicer.

I was old enough to know better. I knew that. I was old enough to not get offended by some teenage twat who probably hadn't even gone through puberty yet, but . . .

Well, my pairs career was a sore spot for me. And by sore spot, I meant a bleeding blister that refused to heal. Mary McDonald and Paul The Piece of Shit Asshole I Would Burn Alive? I'd watched just enough of *The Brady Bunch* late at night when I couldn't sleep to totally get Jan's beef with Marcia. I would have hated her ass too. Just like I hated Mary McDonald's ass.

"Have you seen all the videos there are online of her? My mom says she's got a bad attitude and that's why she never won;

the judges don't like her," the other girl attempted to whisper but basically failed because I could hear her clear as day.

I didn't need to do this. I didn't need to do anything. They were still kids, I tried to tell myself. They didn't know the whole story. They didn't even know part of the story. Most people didn't, and they never would. I'd accepted it and gotten over it.

But then one of them kept on talking, and I knew I wouldn't be able to shut the hell up and let them assume their bullshit. There's only so much a person can take on a good day, and today hadn't been a good one to begin with.

"My mom said the only reason she still trains here is because she's friends with Karina Lukov, but supposedly her and Ivan don't get along—"

I was *this* fucking close to snorting. Ivan and I not getting along? Is that what they were calling it? *Okay*.

"She's kind of a bitch."

"Nobody was surprised she couldn't get another partner after Paul left her."

And there it was.

Maybe if they wouldn't have said the P-name again I could have been the bigger person, but fuck it, I was five foot three and I wasn't built to be that person ever.

Before I could stop myself, I turned around and peeked my head out the door to find the four girls right where they'd been a moment ago. "What did you just say?" I asked, slowly, keeping the *you talentless fuckers are never going to do shit* to myself at least. I made sure to look right at the two that hadn't said hi to me, whose heads pretty much snapped in my direction in horror the moment I started talking.

"I . . . I . . . I . . ." one of them stuttered while the other looked like she was about to crap her leotard and tights. Good. I hoped she did. And I hoped it had a diarrhea-like texture so it would go everywhere.

I stared at each one of them for what felt like a minute each, watching their faces turn bright red and getting just a little kick out of it . . . but not as much as I normally could have if I wasn't already pissed off at myself more than them. Raising my eyebrows, I tilted my head in the direction of the hall-like tunnel I'd just taken from the rink to the changing rooms and smiled a smile that wasn't one at all. "That's what I thought. You should get to practice before you're late."

Somehow, I kept from adding "fuckers" to the end. Some days I deserved a medal for being so patient with idiots. If only they had a competition for that, I could have won.

Chances were that I'd never see two people move so fast ever again unless I watched the sprinters in the Olympics. The two nice girls looked slightly horrified but shot me quick uneasy smiles before following after the other two, whispering God knows what to each other.

Girls like those shitty two were the reasons why I'd stopped trying to make friends with other figure skaters early on. Mini fuckers. I raised my middle finger at the retreating bodies down the hall, but it didn't really make me feel any better.

I needed to snap out of it. I really, really did.

I finished making my way into the changing room and dropped onto one of the benches in front of the row of lockers mine was located in; the ache in my hip and thigh had gotten stronger on the walk over. I'd taken falls a lot harder and more painful than the ones today but, despite knowing that, you never exactly "got used" to the pain; when it happened regularly, you made yourself get over it faster. And the reality of it was, I wasn't training the way I used to, I couldn't—not when I didn't have a partner to practice with and didn't have a coach correcting me for hours each day—so my body had forgotten what it could take.

It was just another shitty sign that time and life kept going even when I didn't want it to.

Stretching my legs out ahead of me, I ignored the handful of older teenage girls already clustered on the opposite side of the room furthest from the door, getting dressed and fiddling with their boots, talking as they did it. They didn't look at me, and I didn't do more than glance at them out of the corner of my eye. Undoing my laces, I thought about showering for all of a second before deciding that was going to be too much work when I could wait twenty minutes until I got home so I could change and shower there in my full-sized bathroom. I took my right white skate off, and then gingerly pulled off the nude-colored bandage that covered my ankle and a couple inches above it.

"Oh my God!" one of the teenagers pretty much shrieked from the other side of the room, making it impossible for me to zone her out. "You're not joking, are you?"

"No!" someone else responded as I unlaced my left skate, trying hard to ignore the girls.

"Seriously?" another voice, or maybe it was the same one from the beginning, piped up. I couldn't tell. It wasn't like I was trying to listen to them.

"Seriously!"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously!"

I rolled my eyes and kept trying to ignore them.

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

Yeah. I couldn't ignore shit. Had I ever been that annoying? That girly?

No way.

"Where did you hear that?"

I was in the middle of putting in the code to my combination lock on my locker when there was a chorus of noises that had me

glancing over my shoulder to glare at the girls. One of them literally looked like she was on speed, she was baring her teeth, and her hands were hanging out right at chest level as she clapped her palms together. Another girl had her fingers knitted together, palms joined in front of her mouth, and she might have been shaking.

What in the hell was wrong with them two?

"Hear it? I saw him walk in with Coach Lee."

Ugh.

Of course. Who the hell else would they be talking about?

I didn't bother sighing or even rolling my eyes as I turned back to my locker and pulled my gym bag out, unzipping it the moment I set it on the bench beside me so I could dig out my phone, keys, flip-flops, and a tiny bar of Hershey's I kept in there for days like today. I took off the wrapper and stuffed that thing in my mouth before grabbing my phone. The green light on the screen blinked, telling me I had unread messages. Unlocking it, I glanced over my shoulder to see the girls there still squawking and making it seem like they were on the verge of having a heart attack over The Asswipe. Ignoring them, I took my time reading through the group chat messages I had missed while practicing.

Jojo: I want to go to the movies tonight. Anyone in?

Tali: Depends. What movie?

Mom: Ben and I will go with you, baby.

Seb: No. I've got a date tonight.

Seb: James doesn't want to go with you? I don't blame him.

Jojo: The new Marvel movie.

Jojo: Seb, I hope you get an STD tonight.

Tali: Marvel? No thanks.

Tali: I hope you get an STD too, Seb.

Mom: WOULD YOU ALL BE NICE TO EACH OTHER?

Seb: All of you can eat shit except for Mom.

Rubes: I'd go with you but Aaron's not feeling well.

Jojo: I know you would, Squirt. Love you. Next time.

Jojo: Mom, let's go. 7:30 work?

Jojo: Seb- 👉

Jojo: Jas, you in?

I looked up as the girls in the changing room made noises I wasn't sure I was capable of, wondering what the hell was going on with them. Jesus Christ, it wasn't like Ivan didn't train here five days a week for the last million years. Seeing him wasn't that exciting. I would rather watch paint dry.

Scrunching up my bright pink-colored toenails, I took them in and purposely ignored the bruise I had right alongside my smallest toe and the start of a blister I had beside my big toe from the seam of a new brand of tights I'd worn the day before.

"What is he doing here?" the teenagers kept going, reminding me that I needed to get out of the room as quickly as possible. I'd already reached my limit for how much I could handle today.

Glancing back at my phone, I tried to decide what to do. Go home and watch a movie or suck it up and go to the movies with my brother, mom, and Ben—or as the rest of us called him in secret, Number Four?

I would rather go home and not hang out in a crowded movie theater on the weekend, but . . .

My hand fisted for a second before I typed up a response.

I'll go, but I need food first. Going home now.

Then I smiled and added another message.

Seb, I third you getting an STD. Aim for gonorrhea this time.

Setting my phone between my legs in the meantime, I grabbed my car keys from the pocket of my bag and snagged my flip-flops, then carefully set each of my skates into a custom protective case lined with a faux-fur over thin memory foam that my brother

Jonathan and his husband had bought me years ago. I zipped my bag back up, slid my feet into my sandals, and got to my feet with a sigh that made my chest feel tight.

Today hadn't been the best, but it would get better, I told myself.

It had to.

The good thing was, I didn't have work tomorrow, and I didn't usually come skate on Sundays either. My mom would probably make pancakes for breakfast, and I was supposed to go to the zoo with my brother and niece since he was picking her up for the day. I'd missed enough moments in her life because of figure skating. Now that I had more time, I was trying to make up for it. It was better for me to look at it like that than get hung up on why I had more time on my hands. I was trying to be more positive. I just wasn't that good at it yet.

"I don't know," one of the girls said. "But he usually doesn't come in for a month or two after the end of the season, and it's been what? A week since Worlds?"

"I wonder if he split up with Mindy."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Why did he split up with any of the rest of them before her?"

I'd already known from the moment one of them said Coach Lee's name whom they were still talking about. There was only one man left at the LC—what most of us called the Lukov Ice and Sports Complex, or the Lukov Complex for short—that these girls would give a crap about. It was the same guy everyone gave a shit about. Everyone except me at least. And anyone else with a brain. Ivan Lukov.

Or as I liked to call him, to his face especially—the son of Satan.

"All I said was that I saw him. I don't know what he's doing here," a voice said.