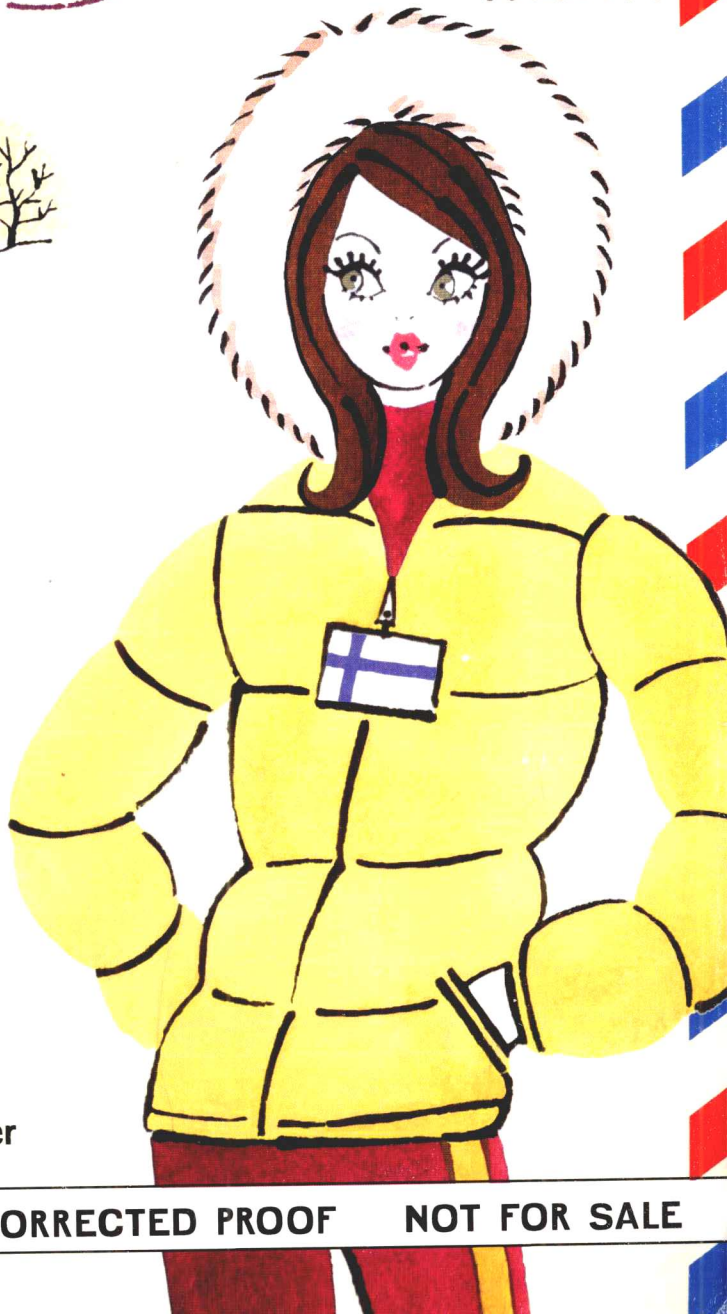


The Finnish Line

Linda Gerber



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藏书章

Linda Gerber

Speak

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SPEAK

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by Linda Gerber

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speak

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Distraction has very strong arms.

"Okay. When you're ready," Leevi said.

Mo hesitated. It was one thing to jump into the arms of your coach, quite another to jump into the arms of—she might as well face it—an abundantly hot if annoyingly unreadable club-mate. But the look on his face was all business. For all intents and purposes, he was her coach. Kind of.

She took a deep breath of the frozen air and released it slowly, visualizing the muscles in her legs like coils, tightening, strength gathering for the moment of release. And then, keeping her sights focused ahead, she sprang up from the crouch and launched herself forward, body rigid, arms straight to her side, feet flexed and angled outward. Leevi caught her at the hips and held her above his head for several seconds before setting her gently to the ground.

"Good, but you need more power into it. Try it again."

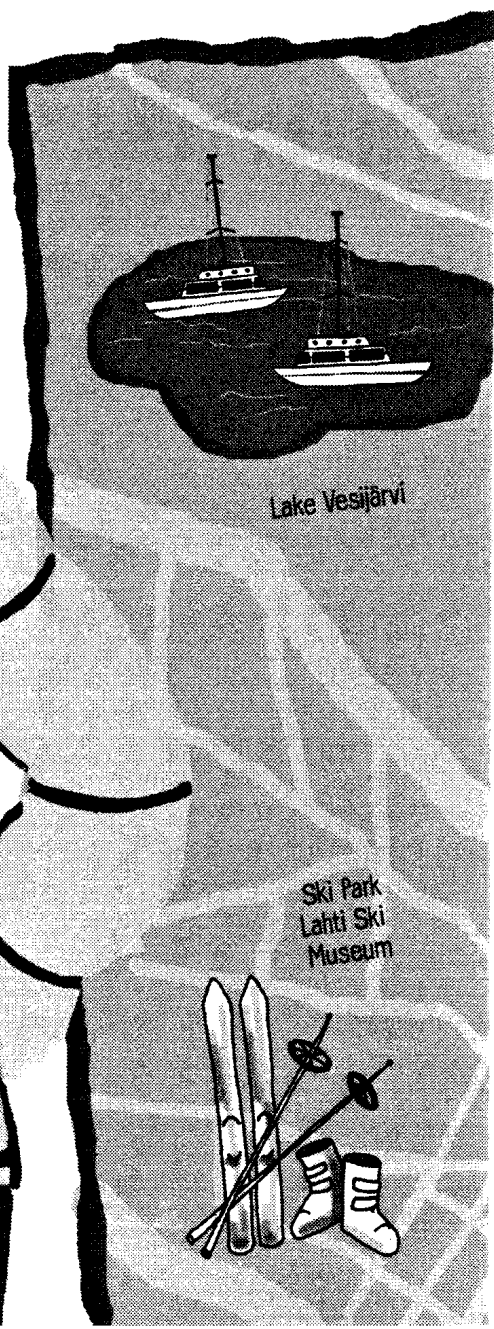
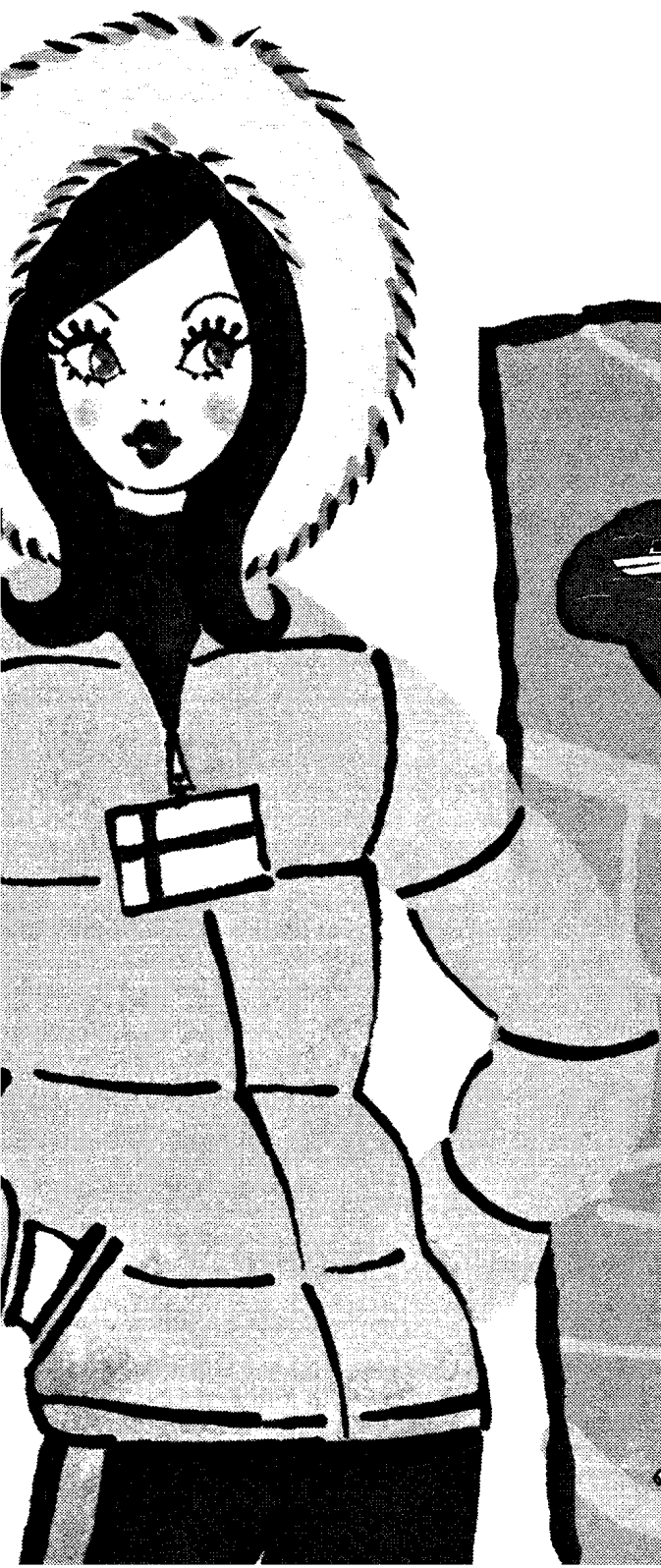
Mo nodded. Okay. He wanted power? He'd get power. She crouched again, summoning every last ounce of strength in her body to jump up and out from the block. He caught her again, only let her down more slowly this time. Or was that just her imagination?

When he set her on her feet, she took a shaky step backward. "How was that?" she managed to ask.

He blew out a breath. "Better."

Dedicated to the Hyvinkää Tyttöt

The Finnish Line



Maureen's Lahti



Gallery Pro Puu



Church of the Cross

Lanu Sculpture Park



Lahden Upper Secondary School



Lahti Historical Museum



**Application for the Students Across the Seven Seas
Study Abroad Program**

Name: Maureen Clark

Age: 16

High School: Park City High School

Hometown: Park City, Utah

Preferred Study Abroad Destination: Finland

1. Why are you interested in traveling abroad next year?

Answer: I have always been interested in the Scandinavian culture and would love an opportunity to experience it firsthand in Finland.

(Truth: Finland just might be far enough away from my overinvolved dad to give me the chance do something on my own for a change.)

2. How will studying abroad further develop your talents and interests?

Answer: As a competitive ski jumper, the opportunity to learn new training techniques would only serve to enhance my performance on the hills.

(Truth: Jumping in Finland is about the only thing someone in my family hasn't already done.)

3. Describe your extracurricular activities.

Answer: Ski jumping

(Truth: What else is there?)

4. Is there anything else you feel we should know about you?

Answer: I am an eager learner and open to new experiences.

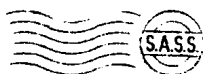
(Truth: Just get me away from home!)

Chapter One



Maureen Clark juggled her ski bag and rolled her suitcase over the polished floors of the arrivals lobby in the Vantaa-Helsinki airport. Electricity hummed in the glass prisms overhead, echoing the vibrations of excitement in her bones. After all those months of waiting, she was really and truly here.

She scanned the crowd for the representative from the Scholar Athlete Exchange program who was supposed to be waiting for her. Her smile faltered when she didn't see anyone, but only for a second. The flight had come in nearly forty minutes early, so whoever was coming probably



hadn't had time to get there yet. No need to let it spoil the moment. She was sixteen, not six. She could wait.

She found the currency exchange booth and traded her dollars for euros and then bought a prepaid cell phone at the neighboring Nokia kiosk. Her dad had insisted she get one "in case of an emergency." Like she didn't know the real reason: control. He might have agreed to let her travel halfway around the world, but he still wanted to keep a leash on her. Since she was the youngest of seven kids—the baby of the family and one of only two girls—to say he was protective of her would be an understatement. Try smothering.

Whatever. She wasn't going to argue about anything that got her a cell phone. She found a phone with a text-messaging option and bought an international calling card so she could use the phone for her own "emergencies"—like keeping in touch with her best friend back home.

She glanced at her watch. Too early in Utah for calls, but she could still send a text. Finding a quiet corner, she pulled out the phone and quickly thumbed in a message to her friend Janessa.

am in will call @ 5 2night b there

A hand touched her shoulder and Maureen jumped, nearly dropping the phone. Behind her stood a man wearing a GoreTex jacket and a pinched expression on his face. "Maureen Clark?"

"Yes?"

His posture relaxed. "I was afraid we'd lost you. Arho Peltonen, coach of the SAE club. Sorry I was late." He extended his hand and she shook it.

"Hauska tutustua," she said in her best phrase-book Finnish. "Pleased to meet you."

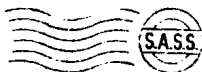
His smile broadened. "Ah. You've been studying. Excellent. Shall we go? If you'd like to gather your things, I'll pull up the car."

And that's how Maureen Clark found herself standing alone outside an airport halfway around the world from her home in Park City, Utah... grinning like a fool.

In the darkness, Maureen could just make out the silhouettes of trees beyond the airport parking lot. It was only four-thirty in the afternoon, but already black as midnight. She'd been warned that January days in Finland were short, but she didn't care. Limited daylight she could get used to. The important thing was that she was here.

Twin beams of light skittered over the ice and snow as a sleek Volvo wagon crunched up to the curb. Coach Peltonen swung open his door and jumped out, hurrying around the front of the car to take Maureen's suitcase. "Right, then. In you go. I'll load the bags."

She slid onto the leather seat and adjusted her lap belt, watching him in the rearview mirror. So this was her coach for the next ten weeks. He was a little older than she'd expected, with gray, thinning hair and a face weathered by



years of sun and snow. Still, he moved with athletic grace as he fitted her suitcase and long skis into the bed of the wagon and slammed the door closed.

Behind the wheel once more, Coach Peltonen turned to her. "So."

"So," she replied.

"I was honored to see your name on our enrollment." He eased the car away from the curb. "I am a great fan of your father's."

The smile melted from her face. *Not here, too.* As if her huge family wasn't enough, Maureen's dad—the control freak—was a former Olympian who had parlayed his medals into a career of extreme ski movies and coaching. He ran a top-ranked ski school near Park City and had become something of a local celebrity. The kind of notoriety he generated was exactly what Mo had hoped to leave behind.

"Really," she said.

"Yes, yes." Coach Peltonen nodded. "Saw his final run in Innsbruck in 'seventy-six. Watched every one of his films."

"Uh-huh." She watched snowflakes swirl past the window and felt the long arm of her dad's shadow reaching out to reel her in. She stiffened. No. None of that. She hadn't come five thousand miles just to let his image dominate her life from afar.

"He's quite a man, your father. We often hear of his school. You must be very proud, Miss Clark."

She managed to give him a smile. "Please, Mr. Peltonen, my friends call me Mo."

He chuckled. "And my athletes call me Coach." The turn signal ticked rhythmically as he changed lanes. "Mo." He gave her a sidelong glance. "Yes, I think it suits you. No nonsense. Strictly business."

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she just stared out the window again. Frost clung to the glass in random sketchy swirls, catching the light of passing cars and obscuring the snow-shrouded trees that huddled along the roadside. It looked so cold out there, yet inside the car was so nice...so warm... She yawned.

"Oh, no you don't." Coach Peltonen poked her arm. "Make yourself stay awake until the local bedtime and you'll get over jet lag a lot quicker."

Mo stifled another yawn and shook herself. "So...how far is it to Lahti?"

"About an hour's drive. Should give us time to go over some of the details of the program since you weren't able to make it for orientation."

She grimaced. "Yeah, sorry about that." The other students and their host families had met together the night before. Mo hadn't been able to make it because she'd needed to stay in Utah for her older brother's wedding. "Thanks for making a special trip to the airport to get me."

"Not to worry. You'll make up for it in practice." He flashed another smile. "Now reach behind the seat and