
Chapter 1

"Linden, Linden. Can you hear me, son?"

A voice, coming from somewhere above me.

I didn't want to open my eyes in case everything was still black. Even worse, I didn't want to open my eyes and see Cassie McKay and BJ Kelsey laughing at me from behind the glass.

"Linden. Open your eyes, son." That voice again.

I did as I was told and found myself gazing fuzzily into the concerned face of my coach, Mr. Dietrich. He smiled, with relief I guess. Thomas's face zoomed in over his shoulder, although he didn't look nearly as concerned.

"You gonna live?" he asked, only his mouthguard made it a bit garbled. Or that might have been my fuzzy head again.

"Try to sit up." Mr. Dietrich put an arm behind me and helped me sit up on the ice. The buzzer had really gone now and the sparklers had disappeared too.

I didn't dare look behind me to see if Cassie was still there.

"Thank God for helmets," Mr. Dietrich muttered as he skated slowly beside me to the bench. "You're going to feel that one later, I'll bet. What happened, anyway?"

I tried to think back. Skating, Cassie's face, and then falling. Oh yes, and Brett's stick.

I leaned on the boards and turned around to watch the guys skating their warm-up laps. Brett was swooping around trying to look cool, passing everybody and dodging in and out, putting on bursts of speed and then coasting. No doubt Cassie was still there behind the glass and he was trying to impress her...

And then he went flying with an enormous crash (he's a pretty big guy for 15) and a big long skid across the ice.

And Thomas innocently stickhandling an imaginary puck, right behind him.

Everybody hooted and Mr. Dietrich went off with a sigh to check on Brett's health. I took a quick look and saw that the girls were still there, laughing.

"You ok?" Thomas asked, skating by. We crashed our sticks together and I skated off with him, ignoring the huddle around Brett. He wasn't hurt, he was just mad. If I ever make it to the NHL, Thomas is going to have to come with me. There are lots of Brett Friedlanders out there.

The rest of practice kind of disappeared in a haze and I was still in a daze when I came out of the dressing room carrying my equipment bag and sticks. I'm always the first one out of the dressing room so I spend a lot of time waiting in the hall for

Thomas, or for Ardith to arrive to drive me home. I'm used to it.

I turned the corner from the hallway into the foyer and ran smack into someone. Someone small and blonde, wearing a yellow ski jacket.

"Oh!" Cassie exclaimed as we bounced off each other.

"Sorry," I managed to mumble. Luckily I hadn't been carrying my stick high or I might have dented her perfect teeth.

"Oh, it's you, Linden," she smiled. She really did have perfect teeth. "That was some fall you took out there. Did it hurt?"

"Uh..." Linden Flanders, great conversationalist.

"Good thing you were wearing a helmet," BJ Kelsey said beside her.

"Yeah," I managed to mumble.

We stood there for a moment in awkward silence. At least, I felt awkward, the way I usually do when Cassie is anywhere within a fifty mile radius. BJ doesn't have that effect on me, for some reason, maybe because I've known her forever. But Cassie only moved to Marshwood a year ago, and she's a bit more exotic than most of the girls who grew up around here.

For one thing, she's pretty rich. Her family is kind of different from everyone else around here. I mean, if they could see my house, with my dad's workshop taking up the whole basement, and our car that was out of date about ten years ago...well, it's as if she comes from another planet completely.

We all stood there for a minute and I couldn't help wishing Thomas would come and rescue me, but I

was also wishing he wouldn't, because it's not very often I get to stand there talking (talking? Get real, Flanders!) with Cassie McKay.

"We were just watching the practice because BJ's writing about the start of hockey season for the paper," Cassie explained. "I hope we didn't distract you too much."

I could feel the blush creeping red and hot up my neck. Good thing I had my jacket already done up.

"No, no, uh, you didn't." No, Brett's stick did that, I thought to myself.

"Well," she was turning away now, "see you at school tomorrow."

"Sure, yeah," I really outdid myself.

"Bye," she called.

BJ looked as if she was going to say something, then she just waved, smiled her quick smile and turned to follow Cassie.

I don't know why, but I was sweating more standing in the hallway than I had been out on the ice. And my head was fuzzier than ever. The only clear thought was that Cassie McKay had actually talked to me. Sometimes I feel as if my life is all happening in a dream. In fact, I often feel as if I'm in a bad dream.

Even when good things happen, it doesn't feel quite right to me.

Chapter 2

In fact, I should have known when something that embarrassing happened at the very first practice that it was going to be kind of a funny year. Not a bad year exactly, considering how it all turned out, but a weird one, that's for sure.

The first practice of the year is special because it's the start of hockey season, and hockey season for me is the only time I feel in control of things.

In a hockey game, on the ice, I feel as if I can do anything at all. Some games I do. It's hard to explain.

It wasn't always like this. I'd skated a bit before the accident. But when that truck rammed our car and my mom died and both my legs were broken, a lot of things changed.

For one thing, my dad spent more time in his workshop in the basement, building wooden toys. He'd go to work at the hardware store all day then spend all evening and most weekends creating spinning tops and rocking horses and trains that craft stores all over the region bought from him. I swear every house in Marshwood, Rosehill and the three

counties around has a Nicholas Flanders wooden horse.

My father lives for wood, for working with his hands. If it weren't for his toymaking, I think he might just curl up and fade away. He's not very talkative or outgoing or all that interested in life outside our house, but at least he's here with us.

It was Ardith who brought us through the bad time after the accident. She was only eleven, three years older than I was, but she became sort of like the mother-housekeeper-cook, you name it.

It was Ardith who went out and borrowed skates from the Skinners because the doctor had recommended skating to help strengthen my weak legs.

"Just come down to the lake and try them," she kept urging me. "Thomas Skinner and some of the other boys will be there."

She couldn't have said anything worse. There was no way I was going to humiliate myself in front of the boys from school, especially not in front of the Skinner brothers, the fastest, strongest, loudest family of boys in Marshwood. Not only was I a skinny, limping nine-year-old. I also had nightmares (when I could get to sleep at all) and seemed to have a weight on my tongue that made it hard for me to talk right.

But Ardith left the skates on the kitchen table in front of me and they began to cast some sort of spell.

"Thomas Skinner" was written in black marker on the inside. He was the youngest Skinner and I knew him a little. Even though we were the same age and had been in the same class almost every year

since kindergarten, he always seemed to be hanging out with the older guys. He was bigger and stronger than most kids our age, but he was friendly enough. I was just too shy to talk to him much, I guess, and he was too busy playing hockey and basketball with his brothers.

It must have been hard for Ardith to go over to the Skinners' and ask for those skates. My father wouldn't have gone. He didn't - still doesn't - think much of sports, of hockey in particular.

But Ardith insisted I try. She pestered me for days until I finally said ok, as long as she went to the lake first to make sure the coast was clear.

She went with me down the road out of town to the lake by Leiter's Woods, just below the Skinner farm. She put the skates on me and laced them up. She held my arm as we tromped across the snow to the patch of ice cleared by wind and the local boys to serve as the makeshift hockey rink. For a few tentative steps she held my hand, then she let go.

And everything changed. The skates - Thomas's skates - carried me across the ice as smoothly and painlessly as I had ever moved. There was no limp, no weakness. I was slow, but it was as if my feet had been built to glide on skates, as if my legs just knew how to do this.

I remember laughing, and Ardith laughing back at me. My feet kept pushing and gliding, pushing and gliding across the cold, windswept surface of the frozen pond.

After a while I looked up and noticed there were other kids there. I hadn't even seen them arrive. Thomas Skinner was there with his brothers playing

hockey, and when he skated over with an extra hockey stick and said "c'mon", well, that was the beginning.

Because as soon as I held that stick in my hand I suddenly became a different person. I knew exactly what to do with it. I couldn't always do it perfectly, of course, but it seemed as if there was a voice in my head telling me what to do. And I did it. It was like magic.

People say my father can work magic with a piece of wood. Well, I can too. That was the start of my hockey career.

By next season I begged my father to register me in the local house league. I think he was so surprised to hear me beg for anything that he gave in. A little urging from Ardith didn't hurt either. And once again she got the Skinners to supply me with most of the equipment I needed.

At the first practice I was so scared I almost threw up. But Thomas Skinner came and sat next to me, even though there were lots of empty places around the dressing room, and that kept me from giving up and running home.

And everything was fine when I stepped on the ice. I could see the other guys were surprised when I outskated them, and even more surprised when they saw me stickhandle.

When I deked around Brett Friedlander, who then fell heavily in an awkward heap, and I scored, Thomas skated up to me, whooping, and gave me an enormous swat on the rear end with his stick. I had never been happier in my life.

Since then, that first skate on the ice is special. So I should have known things would go weird when I found myself one minute glancing at the faces of Cassie McKay and BJ Kelsey behind the glass, and the next minute feeling Brett Friedlander's stick getting mysteriously tangled up in my skates and the ice coming quickly up to meet me.