

# Stars of the Lake

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# Chapter 1

Patience. When do children learn this trait? This is what I was left wondering as my hands swiftly tied the laces. I moved from one child to the next, then back again to loosen or tighten the laces as needed. I tried to work quickly, as the kids clearly didn't like sitting still. I suppose I shouldn't expect them to know how to tie the laces on their brand new and shiny ice skates. After all, ice skating is what they came here from the city to learn.

My sister had this idea of skating school back in summer and has been putting up ads on billboards all around the city ever since. It seemed to have worked well judging by the amount of kids present. Either that or she should have asked for a much higher price. I was inclined to bet on the latter. Of course we hadn't even got on the ice yet, before I was already forced to help her out. Not quite how I was hoping to spend my first day of vacation.

Studying in the city was fun, but I must admit I missed skating. There were indoor ice rinks for it in the city but those just weren't the same. The ice was unnaturally smooth and soft and the air too warm. It just doesn't feel right without the cold winter air biting one's face.

I turned to look at my sister who was trying to calm down one of the kids, who had been crying ever since they got to the lake. Apparently the kid saw her best friend drowning in the lake last summer and was now scared of the ice breaking beneath her and thus sharing the fate of her friend. It must have been traumatic for a six-year-old and I had to wonder what her parents were thinking signing her up for the course. Her fears were baseless of course, the winter had been extremely cold and the ice was thick.

I had read about the case and remembered it well. It's not like that many things happen in the small town. Apparently the boy had tried to swim to the floating platform in the middle of the lake, most likely to impress some girls who were also on the beach. Sadly a cramp had surprised him and he drowned before anyone could get to him. I don't think his body was ever found either but had probably floated somewhere downstream. It wasn't really a big surprise since there are some quite strong currents in the lake. The family moved away quite soon after the accident and I can't blame them. I would imagine that losing one's only child is not something one wants to be reminded by daily. I put this out of my mind, as it really was not something I wanted to think about on such a nice day.

Luckily the girl calmed down when my dad arrived with his tractor to clear the ice from the snow that had fallen the previous night. Apparently the ice being able to hold a tractor without an issue was convincing enough to ease the kid's fears of falling through the ice. Finally my sister joined me in helping the kids to get geared up. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to keep a few dozen kids from killing each other with the sharp skates and to actually convince them to keep their helmets on.

One boy in particular was problematic but even he put on a helmet once my sister demonstrated what happens when you drop a watermelon on the ice. She then put a helmet on another watermelon and dropped it as well. Results were rather convincing. Seeing that I was no longer needed, I left my sister with the little devils and went to move the nets on the ice for the match me and my friends had planned for the day. It had taken dad a while to clear enough of the ice for both groups but he seemed happy enough to be outdoors. So was I and as to emphasize it, I took a deep breath of the cool air. It really was a beautiful day, with a clear sky and fresh snow everywhere. Perfect day for skating.

I sat into a pile of snow, kicked off my shoes and put the skates on. They were old but at least I had had them sharpened the previous day. However, they were starting to feel quite small so I knew I would have to buy a new pair very soon indeed. Perhaps I could later guilt my sister into giving me some of the money she earns. I'm not sure if she quite realised how much of a group effort her little project would be for the family. Even mother was pulled in to make enough food

for all of the kids.

Stepping on the ice, I felt the lovely feeling of blades biting into it with a satisfying crunch. It was nothing like the artificial ice in the city. I took a slow start, inspecting the ice all over the cleared area. One does not want to skate into a crack or bump while in full speed. The ice was better than it had been in any of the previous years I could remember, and I had been skating since I was four.

It was time to warm up. Slowly accelerating, I started skating in a large circle. Faster and faster, effortlessly sliding over the ice. It felt like flying across the sky, the blue above reflected from the ice. Sometimes the sun would make the ice glimmer so that it looked as if there were many little stars shining beneath or within the ice.

I could never run or even cycle as fast as I could move on my skates. I felt a smile creeping on my face. This is how humans were intended to move, or at least I was personally convinced of that. When I start skating, I never want to stop. Again I found myself wishing that the people in charge would freeze a nice ice on the streets of the city for skating, instead of throwing gravel everywhere to make the streets less slippery. How much more fun would it be to be able to skate wherever you wanted?

A quick turn, blades peeling the top layer of the ice into powder. More speed and a spin, and suddenly I'm gliding across the ice backwards. I noted how I should practise this more as my skills were clearly rusty after nearly a year without skating. Same thing every year. I tried turning. I quite like turning on skates as it looks difficult, but is in reality simply taking sidesteps. Lifting one leg over the other while in motion, slowly but surely changing the direction I'm headed to. Perhaps people find it hard because they're scared to lean towards the ice as they turn, I could only guess. Satisfied with how I managed the maneuver, I turned back forwards again and as I did, I saw my friends sitting by the edge of ice, putting on their skates.

I must have been too focused to notice them arrive. This by itself was a miracle considering how much noise was coming from them. How such a small group can manage to produce so much sound, I will never understand. Back in full speed I headed towards the cacophony of laughter and shouting and made a quick stop right in front of them, sending a cloud of icy powder in the air. Juhani,

my childhood friend who was mysteriously covered in ice powder, got up, picked up my hockey stick that I had left standing in the snow and threw it to me. Smile crossed our faces. The game was on.

# Chapter 2

It was getting dark. Days are short in the winter and fun only lasted a couple of hours. Sun had already set and stars begun appearing on the sky, but there was still enough light to see. However, even I had to admit it was getting too dark for skating and I sat into the pile of snow and switched back to my shoes. I hate that feeling. Being grounded again, so very limited in movement. Not only that but my legs ached all over, as they always do after the first day of furious skating. It takes a while to get used to it.

I walked to the tractor where dad, Juhani and Luukas were waiting. We gave our skates and hockey gear to dad who would take them to my family's home. Me and my friends had a habit of spending time on a cottage of some relatives. Or at least that's where our parents thought we spent time at. It was just by the lake, opposite side of where my family's house stood. They only use the cottage during summers and thus let us use it during winters, on the condition that we keep it clean and take care of it. It provides me a nice place to relax by myself, not being constantly bothered by my siblings.

We waved bye to my dad as he started driving his tractor towards the house and we picked up our skis from the snow. I wasn't really a fan of skiing but it was the easiest way to cross the lake, certainly much nicer than walking through the snow. We talked a lot while crossing the lake and Juhani was sure that in the next hockey match he'd beat me. Wishful thinking, if you ask me. From there the conversation branched to hockey league and its teams, who won against whom and all the usual things we talked about every time we had a chance to get together. Less often nowadays because of

leaving to different schools but we still stayed in touch.

I've known Juhani since the first grade and we used to spend all our spare time together, doing all kinds of things to worry and annoy our parents. As all kids do, I'm sure. I spent some summers with his family on their summer cottage in southern Finland as well, and once I even got to go hunt moose with them. I can't say I enjoyed it. I was sitting on a field with other hunters, waiting for their friends to scare a moose from the forest. It was a good trap. Once the moose was driven from its safe haven to the open field, the hunters shot it before it even knew what was happening. I'm not sure what exactly about the killing they found entertaining, however I'm certain it's not a hobby for me.

As we arrived to the cottage, we cleaned our skis of snow and put them on the terrace against the wall. I pulled out the key and we went in. We only took our shoes off as the cottage certainly wasn't warm, despite the electric heating that the place had. It was kept to the minimum, just enough to keep the water in the pipes from freezing. My legs were hurting and I just wanted to fall on the couch. I was considering asking Juhani to light the fireplace but knew they weren't planning on staying in the cottage.

There's a road not too far from this cottage and we would often take a bus to the city in the evening. We'd be back by morning and our parents never knew we had left the cottage. Sure, we weren't really old enough to buy alcohol but Luukas knew a lot of people who liked to celebrate so there was always a party to attend. A party where people didn't ask age before giving access to the drinks. I've never really cared about getting drunk myself, and in fact I find it rather unpleasant. Peer pressure usually got me into going with them anyways. Getting drunk isn't fun but neither is getting left outside the group. Not this time though, I was way too tired for that.

Juhani and Luukas left before I had even got the fire burning. I suppose there are only so many hours to party, but they could have at least waited to make sure I was okay staying there and not freeze to death or something. I sat in front of the fire and warmed my hands in the radiating heat. Cold and winter were amazing, but returning from that to around nice warm fire was even better.

The small cottage had soon heated up enough for me to rid

myself of the outdoor clothing. I fell on the couch and closed my eyes. I was thinking about taking a nap but didn't feel sleepy, only tired. There was book on the coffee table I had started in autumn but hadn't had time to finish. Before I could pick it up though, my stomach made such loud rumbling noises, that I knew it was time to eat something. With a deep sigh I pushed myself out of the cozy corner of the couch and moved over to the kitchen. The cottage had a fridge and one of my parents had brought food there before my vacation began. I was not sure if it was mom or dad but judging by the considerable amount of junk food, I could make an educated guess that it was dad. He always liked to spoil us, to mom's great frustration.

As I was taking lasagna from the fridge to heat it in the microwave, I thought I saw something move in the corner of my eye. I turned to the window but saw nothing but reflection of the room. Not like I could really see anything anyways, as dark as it was outside by then. Once again I had been spooked by the movement of my own reflection and I was more than happy that my friends weren't around to see it.

I prepared rest of my dinner and carried it to the sofa. There was no reason not to eat it there as long as I was careful not to make a mess. As I started eating the lasagna that was dripping with cheese, I picked up the book and opened it at about the spot I thought I might have left off. I read a paragraph. Frowning, I took another bite of the food and read the paragraph again. This was definitely not the book I had been reading in the autumn. I removed the paper covers and discovered a completely different book within, something about vampires. The owners were clearly into some weird things and I did not need nor want to know more. I put the covers back on and put the book where I found it.

It appeared that I had to find something else to entertain myself with. I knew there was a bookcase on the other side of the couch but I wasn't too keen on moving from my cozy spot. At least not until I had finished my food. Just as I had thought this, snow fell through the chimney putting out the fire. Startled, I dropped some food on my lap and the couch. Today was clearly not my day and I could only hope I could get the stain off the couch. However, I should first get rid of the snow and relight the fire before the cottage starts



getting cold again. Thinking this, I got up once more and crouched by the fireplace. As I did, I heard a knock from the door.

Had my friends missed the bus again? Weather being as cold as it was, it was quite common for busses not to start and thus not arrive at all. I can't say I was happy about this turn of events. Two salty friends denied the joy of partying that they had been waiting for was not the kind of company I wanted. I walked to the door and opened it, ready with a clever remark about their failed party night. There was no one behind the door. I peeked out of the door and looked around, yet still saw no one. I was getting pissed.

Not only would they ruin my evening by their presence, they had also decided to play pranks on me. I wouldn't be surprised if the snow falling into the fireplace would have been their doing as well and I was more than determined to make them clean up the couch if that was indeed the case. I put on my boots and threw my jacket on my shoulders and walked outside. It had started snowing but the doorway didn't have snow as the roof extended over the terrace. However, I spotted some footprints around the terrace, continuing to my right, behind the corner of the cottage. I snuck as silently as I could to the side of the terrace and jumped over the fence, ready to scare my friends.

No one. I followed the tracks further but they stopped behind a window. Looking in, I could see the fridge. A cold shiver ran through me. There really had been someone behind the window. The tracks stopped there so I turned back to go inside. I'd close the curtains and lock the door. Juhani and Luukas would give in eventually and show themselves.

I walked back to the door but stopped before going in. There were more tracks, tracks that hadn't been there when I left the cottage. These were fresh and hadn't been covered under the snow yet. They did not look right. Way too large for either of my friends and the bottom had a weird pattern I knew neither of my friends' boots had. I quickly unlocked the door, went in and locked it again.

Had I opened the glass doors of the fireplace? I didn't think I had, yet they were completely open. I didn't take my boots off this time and walked closer to the fireplace. Someone had definitely been in here. The lasagna was spread all over the couch, the tray fallen on the floor and the book had vanished from the table. My

eyes scanned around the room. How did they get in? Then a fear started grasping my chest... How did they get out?

Just as I thought this, I heard a sound from the kitchen. I started slowly backing away towards the door. Another sound. It was as if someone was trying to open the lockers in the kitchen, but not quite knowing how to do that. I jumped out of the door, closing the door behind me just a bit too quickly. Something shattered in the kitchen, I had startled the intruder. Looking to my left I saw that the skis were gone. Then again, I wouldn't have had time to put them on even if they had still been there. So I started running towards the lake, towards the lights on the other side. Lights meant home and home meant safety.

I was making good progress across the lake. Running as fast as my tired legs could take me, I had already managed to reach the middle. I kept looking back but didn't see anything there. The frosty air was starting to hurt my lungs so I had to slow down and level my breathing. I heard a distant sound from the cottage, glass breaking. I turned to look back and saw a figure standing in the moonlight. Hairs on my arms rose as I looked upon its form, it didn't look right. Then I watched it jump forward and start running on all fours. Its limbs seemed to move in a way no human's, nor normal animal's, ever could. Its running seemed very clumsy, the creature awkward in its movements... but it was fast.

Frozen by fear and shock, I just stood there staring at the strange figure as it was jumping through the snow. It seemed like only seconds but when I finally recovered and was able to tear my eyes away from it, it had already traversed half of the distance between us. It was at least two times faster than I. I ran as fast as I could, the cold air felt as if it was tearing my lungs to pieces, my tired legs burning as if on fire. My feet kept slipping on the ice and I wished more than anything that I had my skates. But I ran. I reached the cleared area where we had been skating, I could see the lights of my home. It was so close. But I could also hear the creature chasing me, ever closer and closer. It made a strange gurgling sound... was it laughter?

I heard the sound of ice breaking, felt my foot crashing through it and I fell on my stomach. As I tried to lift myself up and pull my leg from the hole, the ice under my arms gave in and I fell into the icy

water. The creature was no longer on my mind. The cold water felt like a hit against my face. I quickly recovered from the shock and as my lungs were screaming for air, I started swimming in the direction that I was hoping to be up, towards the surface. My hands hit the ice. I pushed my mouth against it, breathing in the air between the ice and water.

Now was not the time to stop. With air, I could think. Where was the hole in the ice? I had an icepick in my pocket so I could pull myself out of the water, but I couldn't find the hole. I felt a water current moving me beneath the ice. I desperately started beating the ice with my fist, each hit weaker than the last as the water stole heat and strength from my body. I couldn't feel my limbs, even rest of my body was starting to go numb. My arms no longer obeyed my orders to break the ice and my legs stopped kicking.

As I started to sink, time seemed to slow down. I can barely feel the claws tearing into the flesh of my legs, pulling me deeper and deeper. I know people say you're supposed to see your life flash before your eyes...but I do not. I see the boy who drowned, never to be found. The moose running out of the forest as the hunters gurgled. The sunlight glimmering like stars in the ice. No...below the ice. Most of all I see the lights. The eyes! The countless number of them, swarming all around me. Hungry eyes, staring. They were always the stars. The stars beneath the ice...!!

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