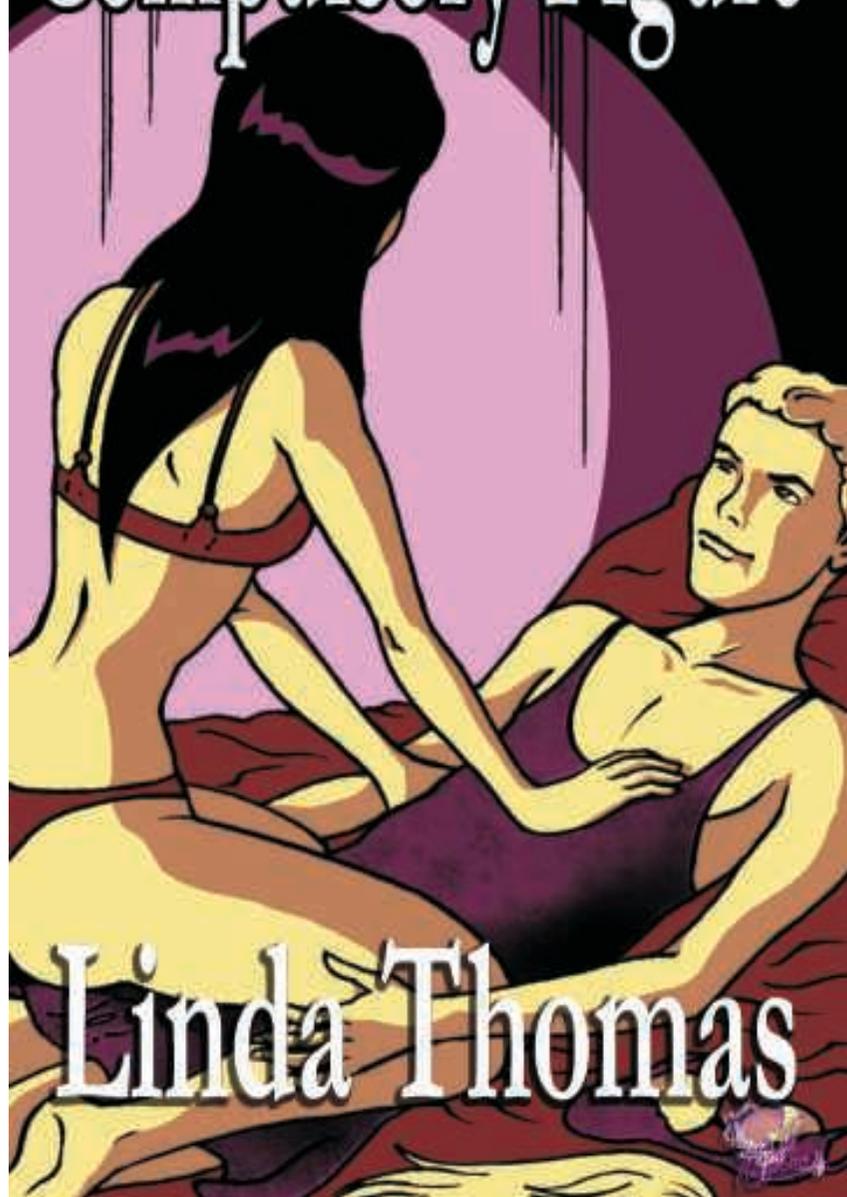


# Compulsory Figure



Linda Thomas



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# COMPULSORY FIGURE

by **Linda Thomas**

## **1. ACCIDENTS DO HAPPEN**

“I can’t help you, Jeff,” said Marisa Melender firmly. Her piercingly dark blue, almost violet-colored eyes, watched the swirling figures as they pirouetted and darted across the ice. Most displayed some attention to the rhythm of the Latin-flavored music Coach Marisa favored for their ‘free-time’ activities.

“But you know everyone here,” Jeff Hubbard went on stubbornly. Marisa waved him to silence as she stared intently at a blonde-haired girl who suddenly

launched herself into the air. There was a definite wobble as the girl landed. Marisa sighed deeply.

"I don't think Tracey's going to be ready, even for City's," she said darkly, a deep frown on her generally unlined, lightly-tanned face. Now, lines appeared as she contemplated the girl figure skater. She thought of all the money the girl's parents had expended on Tracey's classes in the last year, the extra for Masters classes at the university rink.

Oh well, perhaps Tracey would be more willing to listen to her coach after she failed dismally at her attempt to be a single. She just didn't have the jumping ability. Without that, a career in figure skating was limited to dancing in ice shows. Luckily, Tracey was well suited to that, thought Marisa.

"Then perhaps with me," Jeff cut in, almost too eagerly.

Marisa turned and gave him a brief, knowing smile. On the wrong side of thirty, she was a dozen years older than Jeff Hubbard and a head smaller. "No," she said, shaking her glossy, dark hair, held back from her face by a black headband. "Not just anyone will do, Jeff. Tracey isn't good enough. None of the girls here are. You'd have won the Nationals this year with Karen; and you'd be close in the Worlds, if she could be your partner, and you know it."

The ambitious, dark-haired boy's strong jaw jutted out in determination as he nodded at his figure skating coach. He knew Marisa Melender never made predictions, never. She never gave out a lot of praise, either. Trust her to praise him now, his expression seemed to say to Marisa, now that he, bursting with energy and at the peak of his fitness and readiness, was sidelined due to the loss of his Pairs' partner.

Marisa knew she must give more praise, be more positive. She was well known for pointing one of her long fingernails at the ice and just saying, "Work", whenever her prima donnas came to her for advice on how to improve. They all had such huge dreams for the future but so did she. It was why they came to her and put up with the regimens she imposed upon them.

Marisa had been a champion herself. She'd already coached finalists in the Nationals, all of them moving on, now, to pro careers as featured artists. She had the tag herself of being 'up and coming' as a coach. She'd anticipated that Karen Watkins and Jeff Hubbard would be the breakthrough she needed this year to become a 'championship-winning' coach. Then she might be able to drop rich losers like Tracey and devote herself more to real talents like Peter Vernon.

In talking aloud to Jeff, Marisa sensed she'd broken one of her own rules. There was color in her cheeks as she turned back to the rink and looked over the elite skaters working out with her. A young boy eased past. Nonchalantly, in perfect rhythm and control, he performed the double axel jump that had given Tracey so much trouble on the landing. The boy hadn't been moving fast. If he stepped up his speed a notch, a triple wasn't beyond him, even though he was so new to her program. Effortless triple axels meant he was Nationals material.

"Peter," Marisa snapped, pointing at the boy. He glanced back at her call, executing a reverse pivot with practised ease and came over to listen to her. "Move it!" she yelled at him to be heard over the raucous, tinny music. She waved her arms to indicate to him she wanted to see him move much more quickly.

Marisa's voice was continually hoarse from the effort of trying to make herself heard and understood in

drafty ice caverns like the Carlos Melender Memorial Arena. "Speed up! Work! Work! Work!" she said, smiling at the young man.

Jeff Hubbard stared at her, open-mouthed. He watched the boy pick up speed and recognized someone who was going to be a solo skater. He was good, Jeff decided, and clearly a favorite of Marisa's. He should go far. But it was time for Jeff to get out there and see which of the girls, casting alluring glances his way, would be suitable as a partner.

When he was younger, it hadn't been a problem for Jeff. He was a figure skater and a robust young man, clearly not gay, as so many kids were. That kid out there whom Marisa liked looked pretty slim and faggoty to Jeff. Look at the way he was taking his turns with such balletic grace in the movement of his arms. It was why Jeff liked Pairs with all the lifting he did. Besides, it let him get his hands about pretty girls, and in some interesting places as well.

Jeffrey Hubbard smiled as he thought about the giggling Karen got up to sometimes when he went a little overboard on the rink. "Remember that one for later," Karen would whisper to him. He did, very much enjoying his 'laters' with Karen. One of the perks of being a strong, male partner on the ice, was the off-ice friendly benefits.

Marisa called to Peter again, about something else, just as Jeff was about to take off across the ice. Surprisingly, to Jeff, at least, the boy hung his head, completed a short circuit and backward skated gently towards them, snowplowing to an easy stop. At first glance, Jeff thought the kid to be very young to be out there. He was what, in grammar school or early high school. He was thin-faced, rather fresh looking, his

face a little reddened by the cold air in the arena, his dirty-blond hair almost into his eyes.

"Miss, Miss Melender," the kid began, his voice little more than a whisper.

"I want you to skate, Peter," said Marisa firmly, a frown on her face. "I know it's free skate but I want you to push it, all the time now. You've been accepted in Men's Singles. I'll be disappointed if you're not in Chicago," that was where the Nationals were being held that year, "after the Regionals in Denver."

Jeff Hubbard raised his eyebrows. So the kid must be eighteen at least and very good to even be allowed in the qualifiers. At his age, Jeff had tried to solo and hadn't made it, even to Junior Men's Singles. The kid must be very good, indeed. The news didn't please the kid at all, however, Jeff noted. It affected him, almost in the reverse. He looked upset and abashed at Marisa's proclamation.

"I'm, I'm sorry, Miss Melender," the boy she'd called 'Peter' stammered, coughing to clear his throat. His voice hardly seemed to have broken to Jeff Hubbard. Then he grinned. Maybe the kid was gay after all and wanted to sound like that. "I, I won't be c-coming to the rink to s-skate any m-m-more."

Marisa's face took on a look that showed every one of her thirty-five years. "What!" she snapped. Jeff Hubbard and his problem were completely ignored as she stared at the young, male skater.

"There's, there's just n-no m-m-more m-m-money," Peter said, finally getting it out. Light-blue eyes flickered unhappily in Jeff's direction. "This, this w-will b-be the last lesson I'll b-be here f-f-f-for."

The words were stilted and came out as if they'd been rehearsed several times over. Jeff Hubbard

looked away. It was a common problem and, luckily, one which he didn't share. Drs Martin and Shirley Hubbard each gave their only son a generous allowance as well as paying for the best coaches, for traveling to competition, and for ice, expensive, commercial ice times. Ice was reserved for the use of just Jeff Hubbard and his partner, Karen Watkins. Jeff normally wasn't ever out in one of Marisa's elite sessions, sharing her attention, or the ice, with other skaters.

Car crashes occur all the time. It was just Jeff Hubbard's misfortune that Karen Watkins had justified the high insurance rates for young drivers by wrapping her 'Beetle' around a telegraph pole. Karen would recover in time. Her broken legs would heal but she might never skate in the same way again. She might not be up to the exacting standard she and Jeff had reached this year.

Jeff had felt it, and Marisa had confirmed it. He and Karen would have been competing internationally in the upcoming year. Both of them had been excited at the prospect of foreign travel. Karen had been certain they could edge out the veteran Pairs skaters who'd dominated the nationals for so long. Her face had been tragic as she lay in her hospital bed, just wailing, "Oh, Jeff! Oh, Jeff! I've ruined it all for us," over and over again.

Jeff switched his attention back to his own skating as he heard Marisa call his name. She'd been talking animatedly and very crossly to the other boy who had now skated away, doing circles on his own. Now she was paying attention to Jeff, scolding him for not warming up properly.

It was no good arguing or pointing out to her that there was an hour and a half before his and Karen's lesson was supposed to begin. There would be no

point to it anyway since he didn't have a partner, Jeff thought sourly. Unless he could find one at the elite skate.

Marisa berated him. He was on the ice; and so, he should work. "Now!" Marisa snapped at him. He did or he knew his ears would be ringing with her rebukes for the rest of the day.

Jeff moved in and around almost every female skater as they practised, alert to the girls, and getting several 'pick-me', come on smiles from the girl skaters. They knew what he was about. He checked them all out, those who were partnered already, those looking and those who weren't.

Marisa was right about Tracey and about the other girls there. None of the girls were a match for Jeff in speed, agility or even grace. Marisa glared at him when he came near her. His obvious interest in a dark-haired girl attempting to add a Salchow to a series of spins was unfeigned. It also unnerved the girl so that she spun right out of the jump on two feet, missed the spin and ended up sitting on the ice.

"Peter!" Marisa called, motioning to the young, downcast skater. "Go through your series of doubles with Jeff and let him shadow you. You might as well make yourself useful if this is going to be your last time here."

The kid flushed and didn't look at Marisa or at Jeff even as he skated over. Marisa promptly turned her back on the two boys, She skated off to several girls whom she gathered in a circle and started moving about her, sounding out the cadence she wanted them to use as they practised single jumps off one foot and then the other.

Without a word, Peter began to slowly go through a routine for Jeff to copy. Shadow skating is part and

parcel of pairs skating. Usually one skater leads while the other responds with the trick being not to appear that way at all to watchers and judges. In the very best pairs, each skater could anticipate the other with equal facility so that either could be leading at any particular time.

With Karen, Jeff Hubbard always responded when they first learned their routines, cueing himself to her. With Peter, Jeff found himself almost instantly responded to, his moves anticipated easily by another. His turning of a final double Lutz into a triple was an instinctive move to put the irksome kid into his place. His landing was slightly off but the kid's triple wasn't. He was easing up as Jeff collected himself and headed to the boards.

A faint smile curved Peter's lips as he glanced up at Jeff who glowered back. Jeff knew he was being stupid. The kid was a better skater than him. So, Jeff straightened, smiled, reached over and ruffled the top of the kid's mop of silky hair. Peter looked most affronted.

"What tipped you off to that last move?" asked Jeff, as Peter began to skate away from his condescending gesture.

"Shadowing Marisa," said Peter over his shoulder, his chin lifted in a proud gesture, beginning a series of footwork moves that Jeff couldn't follow at all.

Dr Martin Hubbard took almost no time to agree to Marisa's proposition. "Jeff's always wanted to be the very best," he said, almost boyishly eager to explain why he'd agreed so readily. "Being so tall was a blow until he switched to Pairs and he and Karen got together. Hmm, well, do you think, that, really, he could, you know, with a new partner, be that close to competing in the World's?"

Marisa smiled, her face relaxed, unlined, her makeup flawless. "I can't really say he'll win this year," she said slowly, "but it is important to keep him in there, in the judge's eyes, until Karen returns, next year." She didn't add, if Karen ever returns, though she thought it. "Next year will be their Olympic year and you know figure skating judges. I think, to medal at the Olympics, Jeff must have exposure this year."

Dr Martin Hubbard needed no further persuasion. Whatever Jeff needed, he and Shirley would provide, even to the point of providing finances, quite privately of course, for the impoverished partner Marisa had found for their son. He left in a hurry, as always, embarrassed by the large cheque he'd handed over.

Yes, Martin Hubbard said he had to go. Patients waiting, appointments made that had to be kept. Marisa had heard it before but the result was always the same. Dr Martin Hubbard indulged his son with his cheque book, leaving someone else to spend time instructing his only, rather spoiled son in both life and figure skating. As if, as for her, the two were the same, to Jeff.

"He went for it?" asked a smirking Jeff Hubbard, leaning over the boards of the rink, his hands clasped while he supported himself by his elbows.

"He'll give financial support to your new partner, yes," said Marisa curtly.

Jeff couldn't hold her eyes brazenly as he'd intended. He licked his lips as he looked away. The rink was empty and cold but Marisa was staring over the surface, her expression softening as if she was imagining herself still racing over the pristine surface, her skates rattling, the wind whipping over her smooth, soft-skinned face.