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‘Beautiful.’

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Carroll is a bestselling author and the ‘Queen of Historical Fiction’ (*BookTrust*). She has been nominated for and the winner of numerous national, regional and schools awards – including the Books Are My Bag Readers’ Award, Branford Boase, CILIP Carnegie Medal, Young Quills, Teach Primary and the Waterstones Book Prize. Emma’s home is in the Somerset hills with her husband and two terriers.



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FROST
HOLLOW
HALL

EMMA CARROLL

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To Owen, always

THE COMBE VALE CHRONICLE

Tuesday 7th February 1871

A TERRIBLE TRAGEDY

A most terrible incident has occurred at Frost Hollow Hall, the country estate of Viscount Barrington near the village of Frostcombe.

Lord Barrington's only child, Christopher, died tragically yesterday afternoon whilst skating alone on a frozen lake in the grounds. It appears that he fell through ice too weak to bear his weight, and came to grief in the cold water.

The alarm was raised some hours later when he failed to return for dinner. His body was then discovered close to the edge of the lake.

Lord Barrington is said to be devastated; Lady Barrington lies in a perilous state under the care of doctors. The Honourable Christopher Barrington, known as 'Kit', was heir to Frost Hollow Hall, and a popular fellow in the Frostcombe area. The village is in deep shock at his sudden and untimely death.

WINTER 1881



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THE DARE

I was proper fed up with waiting. I'd been on look-out now for two whole hours and there was still no sign of Pa. At every noise my spirits rose, only to be dashed as I glanced at the clock.

He was late. *Two hours late and getting later.*

Outside, the frost hadn't lifted all day. It coated the inside of our windowpane too, so it was a job to get a good view of anything. Just to look decent, I'd kept on my best Sunday frock, though the fabric was thin and I was shivering cold. I'd even had a go at tidying my hair, and now that was escaping from its plaits. Nothing was going to plan.

'For flip's sake, Tilly, *do* something useful,' said Ma irritably, as I flopped down into my seat for the thousandth time. 'Shame you're so useless at sewing, or you could help me.'

'And take that smart frock off. It's only Pa coming home, not the Queen!' said my sister Eliza, who

couldn't sew either, though no one seemed to mind about *that*.

I shot her a look but didn't bite back. In truth, I was too distracted to care. Pa was due home today from a stint on the railways. There'd be money at last, which would put food on the table and pay the rent that we owed. More importantly, he'd have kisses and kind words for me.

A sudden noise and I jolted in my seat.

Someone was at our front door. It wasn't a proper knock. It was a low, secret sound like an animal scratching to get in. And it seemed I was the only one who'd heard it.

My heart sank. It was too quiet to be Pa. The noise came again. It was louder now.

Eliza looked up from the fire. 'That someone outside, Tilly?'

'Seems so,' I said.

'Find out who it is, then,' she said, and shooed me like I was some sort of servant.

I turned to Ma. 'Do I have to?'

She didn't answer. She was staring at the door, her lips set tight. I knew that look, and it made my heart sink more. It wasn't Pa she was thinking of, but the overdue rent and the landlord who came knocking for

it. Chances were it was him again.

‘Tell ’em I’m not in,’ said Ma, when clearly she was. I went to say so, but Ma raised her hand.

‘Just do it, will you!’

I didn’t much fancy a clout round the ear, so I made for the door. I opened it just a sliver. The air coming in was bitter cold. It wasn’t the landlord stood there. What I got was the back view of a person jiggling something under his coat like he was just about to drop it. When he turned round to face me, I shut the door quick and leaned against it hard.

Will Potter. Will *blasted* Potter. What the heck was he doing here?

‘Tilly!’ he hissed at the keyhole. ‘Come outside, won’t you?’

My heart started going like the clappers in my chest.

‘Tilly! You there?’

I prayed he’d go away.

He’d been clowning about in church today, singing stupid words to the hymns and pulling faces all through the sermon. Annie Woods and Hannah Brown had giggled under their bonnets, daft things; I swear I’d looked the other way. God help me if I’d actually smiled at him without thinking.

Eliza was watching me. ‘Who’s out there, then?’ she said.

‘No one much. They’ve gone now.’

‘Good,’ said Ma, clearly relieved.

Eliza waited ’til I’d moved back to the fire, then fixed me with a wicked stare. ‘So why’ve you gone all red?’

‘I in’t!’ I cried, feeling my face go redder still.

And then Will Potter knocked again, a proper *rat-tat-tat* this time so the whole world might hear it. Eliza was the first on her feet.

I grabbed her arm. ‘Don’t answer it!’

‘Why the heck not?’ she said, laughing. ‘It can’t hurt, can it?’

‘Just wait a bit, and he’ll definitely go away.’

‘*He?*’

Quick as a flash, she lunged for the door.

‘Eliza, no!’ I cried. ‘Leave it!’

God’s teeth! I didn’t even like Will Potter. He was far too sure of himself, though it seemed I was the only girl in Frostcombe who’d noticed.

Now Eliza threw the door open wide, making Ma cry ‘Keep the heat in!’

And so Will Potter was asked inside.

Immediately, our one downstairs room looked

smaller. I saw Will taking in the low, dark beams, the threadbare rug before the hearth and the turnips in a basket on the dresser. The only tidy thing was our table, covered in neat piles of mending work that Ma took in from the village. It paid little and hurt her eyes. But even on a Sunday, she sewed.

I felt hot and angry all at once. What did Will Potter know about being poor? *His* pa owned the butcher's shop. *And* he'd built a smart brick house on the edge of the village where the Potter family lived. In our house, we didn't even own enough chairs for us all to sit down at the same time.

'Will in't staying,' I said, as Eliza beckoned him into my seat.

Yet he'd already taken his cap off so his dark hair stood on end, and his face was one big smarmy smile. He was still shifting something about under his jacket too. I wanted to die on the spot.

'You come for our Tilly, then?' said Eliza, smirking. 'She's looking smart today, in't she? Maybe she was expecting you all along.'

'No! I weren't!' I cried.

But she winked at Ma, who was starting to see the funny side of things. I wondered how their mood could lift so fast, when just the sight of Will Potter

made me feel ten times worse.

Not that he'd even noticed.

'I have come for Tilly, yes,' he said, mighty sure of himself.

'I in't going nowhere.'

And I meant it, for boys never looked twice at me. I was a small, skinny creature with a face full of freckles and wild dark hair that wouldn't stay put. Eliza was the handsome one. Ma always said it, and Eliza certainly *thought* it. Pa was the only person who'd ever called me pretty, though I reckoned he was just being nice. Besides, Will Potter could have his pick of the girls. What the heck could he want with me?

I decided he was only here to make mischief. I didn't trust him an inch.

'That in't very friendly, Tilly,' said Eliza. 'You be nice to Will.'

'But I can't go,' I said, and not just because it was Will Potter asking. Pa would be home any moment. I couldn't possibly go out now.

'Course you can,' said Ma. 'It'll stop you moping round here all afternoon. Only don't get into no trouble.'

'But Pa'll be here soon,' I said.

Ma snorted. 'I wouldn't hold your breath!'

I didn't like her saying this, not in front of Will, and that sinking feeling came back, all cold and hard in my chest.

Will turned to go. 'Well, if I can't tempt you . . .' he said.

Slow and stealthy so only I could see it, he opened up his jacket an inch or two. I couldn't resist a quick peep inside. There was leather, a buckle, something pale, the colour of wood. I'd not the faintest idea what it was. He must've read my frown, shifting the thing so I saw it better. Silver blades glinted back at me from the dark inside of his coat. I knew at once and my heart leapt.

Ice skates!

I looked right at him.

'Dare you,' he mouthed.

My mind began to race. I'd heard plenty about Will Potter's stupid dares – jumping off bridges and riding horses bareback in their fields, the sorts of things a great big show-off would do. But I couldn't imagine for one second those daft girls in church being up for such a lark.

I was.

It'd been a long afternoon, sat in waiting for Pa. A bit of fresh air might not be such a bad idea.

I glanced at Eliza, who'd got bored of us now and was toying with her hair, and Ma, who was sorting through the turnips. And I saw the glint in Will's eye, the challenge laid down.

'All right. I'll come. But just for a bit,' I said, and grabbed my shawl off the peg.

*

Outside, it was icy underfoot and the sky was already turning pale. Halfway down the lane, Will stopped and faced me.

'You ready for this?' he said.

'Course. Are we going to the river? It's frozen over down by the bridge.'

'The river's for babies. We're going somewhere else.' And he nodded towards Combe Hill, where the lane rose sharply out of Frostcombe village.

'Where, exactly?'

Beyond the village was the turnpike and the main road to Bristol. And beyond that was the biggest house for miles around: Frost Hollow Hall.

My stomach dropped. He wouldn't be *that* stupid, would he?

'Oh no, Will,' I said. 'We can't!'

It would get Ma's dander up if she knew. No one went near Frost Hollow Hall, not since that boy died there in the lake. There was talk of dogs and traps and men with sticks for anyone who went there uninvited. The tragedy had turned the Barringtons quite strange. And there were stories of queer happenings in the house too. But it didn't help to dwell on these matters; I felt edgy enough already.

'Thought you was game,' said Will. 'Perhaps I should've asked your sister instead.'

I was right about him. He really did only want to make mischief. Not that I was about to go home again, whatever Will Potter thought. Because more than anything else, I was dying for a go on those skates.