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Opening extract from

Frost Hollow Hall

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1
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.

2
On Thin Ice

We followed the road for a mile or so and then, quite suddenly, the gates to Frost Hollow Hall loomed before us. They were great tall things, the ironwork all twisted leaves and queer-looking flowers. And they were very definitely shut.

'It in't very welcoming,' I said.

Will looked at me like I was a complete hare-brain. '*Exactly*. That's why it's a dare.' And he led me to a hole in the hedge, the sort made by badgers on their travels. 'This is our way in. Now stay close.'

But I didn't fancy tucking right in behind him, so I waited 'til he'd elbowed his way through.

'Thought you'd done a runner,' he said, as I eventually emerged from the hedge.

'Just keeping me distance, so you don't get no ideas,' I said.

And though he laughed, I was glad I'd put him straight. Girls had this habit of swooning over Will

Potter and if he thought I would too, only to mock me for it, then he could blinking well think again.

We now stood in a gloomy thicket. It was quiet as death; even the birds weren't singing. I didn't care for the place, and felt the shivers go through me, though I did my best to hide it. When Will set off again, I stayed close this time. We followed a narrow path that twisted and turned between the trees. Soon enough, the woods thinned and we slithered down a hill and out onto open ground. No sign of those men with dogs, though I kept my eyes peeled just in case. We went through a gate and over a field to the crest of another hill. Here we came to a halt.

'Look at that,' said Will, gazing at the view below.

Spread out before us was the thickest, most marvellous frost I'd ever seen. The grass was so pale it might've been snow, the trees all white like bones.

'It's a frost hollow,' said Will, smugly. 'Catches the cold air and hangs onto it. That's how the house got its name.'

'Oh? Is that right?'

I had to admit it was a sight to behold.

'Where's the house, then?' I said.

Will pointed to a stand of yew trees. 'Behind there. You can't see it from this side.'

My spirits sank. I'd been hoping for a peek at the creepy old place. Then I saw the lake itself, spread out like a great metal platter, just visible through a copse of bare trees. Of a sudden, I couldn't keep still. I hitched up my skirts and set off down the hill.

'Hang about!' Will called, which only made me go faster.

I didn't stop 'til I'd reached the lake edge. Down here, the air felt heavy and chill; it hurt my chest just to breathe. All along the banks were old stone urns and statues with their arms missing. Frost covered everything in a thick white fur.

One look at the lake and my heart beat faster. It was frozen right across. I had this sudden urge to be out in the middle of it. All by myself, where no one could get on my nerves.

'Can I have a go? ' I said to Will when he'd caught me up.

He shook his head. 'I'm first.'

'Oh go on, please.'

He ignored me. Crouching on the grass, he pulled the skates from his jacket. They were odd-looking things, part wood, part leather, part blade. The wooden bit was shaped to fit snug against a boot sole; on Will's great feet, they did fit perfectly. He then

fastened the two leather straps over his toes and at his ankle to keep them firmly in place.

'If the ice holds me, it'll hold you,' he said, flexing his feet. 'It's safer to let me try it out first.'

'Bit late to worry about that now.'

This was a dare, wasn't it? Will had made that perfectly clear. We were sneaking about on private land. If we got caught a thrashing would be the least of our worries. Since when did *safe* come into it?

Straightening up, Will wobbled and grabbed my arm. I stood still while he got his balance.

'You don't mind me really, do you?' he said, a smile flitting over his face.

Actually, I minded him very much. He was an irksome wretch. And I'd seen that look before; he used it on all the girls. Very firmly, I prised his hand off my arm.

'I'm only here for a go on them skates,' I said, though in truth they looked way too big. Not that it'd stop me. Heck, I'd get out there in my bare feet if I had to.

The very second he was on the ice, Will started acting the clown. He skated first on one foot, then the other, flapping his arms like he was about to fall, only to right himself in the nick of time. What a daft

lummox he was. I wished he'd get on with it so I could have my turn. And then, as if just to vex me, he darted off across the ice.

I was by myself.

It had got colder. By now the sun was low and red in the sky, and the air so still not even the trees stirred. High above my head, rooks circled and cawed to each other. At my back, the copse grew darker.

I began to feel uneasy again. *A boy died out here*. I pulled my shawl tight against me and shivered.

Somewhere behind me, a twig snapped. I spun round. A blackbird flew past, squawking. Except for my heartbeat, all went still again. Then, thirty or so yards into the copse, a dark shape flitted through the trees. It was a woman. She moved fast and low, away from me. She hadn't seen me yet. I held my breath, praying she wouldn't look back over her shoulder; we were done for if she did. Thankfully, she kept moving. Then she ducked behind an old stone wall and disappeared.

Bit by bit, my breathing slowed to normal. But I didn't fancy being here much longer. It was giving me the creeps. I waved to Will, though it was an age before he saw me. He was right over the other side of the lake; I wondered if he'd forgotten me completely.

Then little by little the black dot that was him got closer, 'til he slid to a halt in front of me.

'That was grand!' Will said, his face all lit up.

I pointed to the trees. 'Someone was there just now.'

His smile vanished.

'Don't fret, they didn't see us,' I said, a little bit pleased to see him rattled.

'Who was it?'

'How the flip should I know?'

'Well, it's getting late. Perhaps we should . . .'

'Oh no.'

I knew Will Potter's game, all right. If we went home now, he'd think he'd won the dare. I wasn't going anywhere 'til I'd been on the ice too.

'I didn't come all this way for nothing. Now give me them skates.'

'Tilly . . .'

I held out my hand. 'Skates!'

He pointed at the ice and said something about the middle, but I wasn't really listening.

'Sit down,' he said, coming back onto the bank. 'I'll put them on for you.'

'I'll do it myself, ta,' I said.

'No, you won't. They have to be on properly.'

So I bit my lip and sat down on the frozen grass.

Will took his time, tutting because my own boots were smaller than the skates themselves, and then fussing over the buckles. I reckoned he was doing it on purpose.

'Oh come on!' I said, as the frost soaked through my skirts. 'It'll be summer at this rate.'

He offered me his hand for a pull up but I waved him off.

'Suit yourself,' he said, and stood back as I got to my knees, then to my feet. Blimey, it was hard enough just to stay upright on the grass! As I stepped onto the ice, my feet shot out in front of me, my arms whirling like mad.

'Steady there!' laughed Will.

I wished he'd just clear off. His blasted skates didn't help much either; they were easily three sizes too big. With my heart in my mouth, I tried to go forward but tipped back, arms flapping like a goose. This was no fun at all. I gritted my teeth. I'd show Will Potter. And I'd wipe that stupid grin right off his face.

I focused on my feet. Though it pained me to admit it, Will had a knack to how he moved his – *down and out*, *down and out*. Somehow, I managed it too. And I stayed upright. I leaned forward, wobbled a bit, went faster. The skates began to glide like they had a life of

their own. My hair lifted off my shoulders. Ice-cold air stung my cheeks.

This was it! I was skating!

A great rush of joy came over me. I kept going. Faster and faster. Everything around me was a blur. I grinned like a mad thing 'til the cold made my teeth hurt. And when I saw how far I'd gone, I finally turned back for the bank. There was Will. He waving both arms over his head, calling something; I didn't hear what. The sight of him soured my mood.

'What you on about?' I yelled.

'Stay away from the middle! You're too far out!'

What an old woman he was!

With a whoosh, my feet went from under me. I fell flat on my backside. I couldn't get up again. My hands and feet slithered like a drunk's. I didn't dare look at Will, though I heard him all right, laughing his ruddy head off.

'Nice linens!' he shouted. 'Show us some more!'

My face went hot. I'd had enough of his smart jibes. 'I'll throttle you, Will Potter! Just you see if I don't!'

All around me, the ice looked rough. There were lines criss-crossing it and I began to feel uneasy, for these weren't skate marks; these were cracks. As I scrambled to my knees, the ice gave an almighty

groan. I froze to the spot.

Oh no! This in't right!

The ice seemed to shift beneath me. I fell forward onto my hands. Right in front of me, the ice turned dark. My heart began to pound. I staggered upright, fell down again.

'For God's sake!' cried Will. 'Get over here! Quick!'

He stood at the edge with his arms outstretched. I was too far out to reach him.