

On Thin Ice

Short Story By

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Free Excerpt

“However strong your feelings are for this boy, Elsie, I cannot and will not consent,” James Hayes counselled his daughter in a firm, raspy tone.

Elsie had expected her father to have a strong opinion about the man she wished to marry, but this flat refusal caused her dark brows to rise. She opened her mouth to question such a quick response but James had already begun to give his reasons.

“William Fitzpatrick is in no way a suitable boy for you to be seen in the company of, let alone entertain as a suitor. He’s a prospector for goodness sake! I admire his keenness for *business*, Elsie, but not the hand of my daughter.” James Hayes lifted his glass from the mantle and swallowed a generous mouthful of whisky, an unusual occurrence so early in the day. The colour of the liquid matched the amber halo that surrounded the pupil of his hazel eyes. Both glinted with reflected flame, and the oaky, strong alcoholic scent sat high in the back of Elsie’s nose.

Elsie’s palms grew hot where they hung at her sides and heat flared in her cheeks. She balled her fists for a moment then stretched her fingers wide in an attempt to keep hold of her emotion. At just seventeen, and still at the mercy of her emotions, Elsie tried desperately not to show it.

“Why not?” Elsie asked, ignoring the waver in her voice. “He works out there alongside the other miners just as hard as anyone else could, if not more. He’s trying to work his way up, just like you did.”

James paced to the window and braced the heel of one hand against the frame. The crisp morning light threw his tall, slim figure into a dark silhouette. At fifty-three, what had once been a full head of dark hair was now shot with silver. It had receded a little at the temple, a result, in part, of raising a teenage Elsie in absence of his beloved late wife. Still a handsome man, and a prosperous one, he caught the eye of every eligible woman when he entered a room but remarriage didn’t feature in his consciousness.

“That’s just it Elise. I’m not denying he’s a hard worker, but he’s just that: a worker of the thirstiest nature. I, at least, started in the middle. William won’t be able to resist the allure of the next big find, wherever in the world that might be.”

A low hum built in the back of Elsie's throat and she swallowed hard to banish it. No matter how difficult the words were to hear, she refused to give cause to be called impulsive or emotional. "Forgive me, but I think you're wrong. He's had some good finds here and saves his profits. Besides, if he and I were married, he could come and work for you. When he gets enough money saved he'll build us a house..."

James held an ink-stained palm up and turned his eyes from the view to his daughter. "You know, the usual way these things are handled are man to man, Elsie. Not between a father and his daughter. Where is William in all this? Don't tell me you've accepted a proposal without my blessing?"

Elsie blushed hot to the tips of her ears but held her ground. "Well, no, not yet. Can you blame him for having me test the waters? He knows it's an unusual situation. Besides, whom I marry should be my choice."

A harsh sigh of frustration escaped James as he crossed the room to take his daughter's hand. He gazed down upon her face for a long moment and Elsie knew he noted her mother's features; the high-brow with a determined sweep of wavy auburn hair that could not be tamed, her emerald eyes with long lashes, and the light scattering of freckles across her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose. He sighed again and squeezed her fingers gently.

"Having the courage to face your sweetheart's father is the very first measure of a suitable husband. Doing your own negotiating is the making of a man. It proves the sincerity of your intent to care for a man's precious daughter. William is dishonouring both of us with his absence, and," James paused for effect, "it's my biggest responsibility as a father to see you married well."

Elsie frowned and swept an errant curl back behind her ear, irritation evident in her rush of breath. "I believe you weren't mother's father's first choice. Had she not made her case to her father, *insisted*, I believe, I would not be here." Elsie avoided her father's eye and pushed on. "William's tender-hearted. He knows your reputation and compares himself. He so wants to impress you. He admires you and the life you've built for us here. He didn't want to misstep. I offered to prepare you first," Elsie bent the truth just a little.

Impatience was another thing James Hayes was known for. Elsie had inherited that trait from him and the deep frown he flashed reminded her of that.

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