Stars in Her Eyes

Erica Vetsch
For Katie Ganshert.
We need another field trip to Galena.

A note from the Author:
I love to hear from my readers! You may correspond with me by writing:

Erica Vetsch
Author Relations
P.O. Box 9048
Buffalo, NY 14240-9048


STARS IN HER EYES

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Pastor Silas Hamilton had become adept at dodging matrimony-minded maidens and their matchmaking mamas, but he’d never encountered a mother as determined as Mrs. Drabble.

Beatrice Drabble had proven resourceful in finding ways to throw her daughter Alicia into his path, and he’d nearly exhausted all valid excuses. Not that he was against marriage, and Alicia Drabble was nice enough. But she wasn’t the girl for him.

“I do hope you’ll accept our luncheon invitation this time.” Mrs. Drabble tilted her head back to peer up at him from under the feather-adorned awning she called a hat. Her button-black eyes bore into him like a rock drill. “You’ve been previously engaged for three weeks straight. Alicia has been so disappointed. She does enjoy your company. And we have a new set of pictures for the stereopticon. Natives from Africa. I thought you’d be interested, since you’ve been encouraging your parishioners to support African missions. . . .” She left the statement hanging, arching her dark eyebrows at him and drawing her lips into their habitual pucker.

He swallowed, his insides squirming. Invitations made under the guise of church work were always the most difficult to evade.

Conversations buzzed around them as people filed out of their pews and stood in line to shake his hand before heading home to a hot meal and a quiet afternoon. Spring sunshine
streamed through the brand-new, stained glass windows that marched down the sides of the church, throwing blocks of color on his congregation as they milled and chatted. The installation of those windows—special ordered all the way from Germany—marked the end of the first major tussle he’d encountered in this, his first solo-pastorate position. Mrs. Drabble had been at the center of that little maelstrom, too.

Alicia Drabble stared over his shoulder, a faint pink tinting her cheeks. China-blue eyes that rarely met his, golden ringlet curls, porcelain skin, and an air of fragility—nothing at all like her mama, whose physique tended more to the cider barrel shape.

He shook Alicia’s limp hand and turned back to her mother. “I do thank you, but I’m afraid I will have to decline once more. I’ve already accepted an invitation to lunch at the Mackenzie home.” And grateful he was, too.

The Drabble matron’s face hardened, and the creases at the corners of her lips deepened. “I see.” She tugged at the hem of her bodice and shifted her Bible to her other arm. “You do realize your first annual review as our pastor is coming up soon. The district supervisor is a very good friend of mine, and it would pain me to have to tell him you were playing favorites amongst your congregation.”

The barb in her voice nicked his conscience, and he did a quick gallop around his social calendar to see if she might be correct. Had he been showing favoritism to some over others? The last thing he wanted or needed was a bad report sent to the home office, and until recently, he’d not feared one. But the drawn-out discussions that bordered on arguments over something as simple as new windows for the church had set up a distant warning gong in the back of his mind. In the front of his mind was the knowledge that his father, as the home office director, would be sure to read any report and know his son wasn’t living up to his exceedingly high expectations.
Matilda Mackenzie appeared at his elbow as if she had somehow sensed he could use rescuing. “Silas, we’re looking forward to your visit today. David and Karen want to show off the little one and talk about a dedication service here in a few weeks.”

Mrs. Drabble’s severe expression melted into a smile, and she held wide her arms. “Matilda, so lovely to see you.” Embracing the smaller woman, she kissed the air beside Matilda’s cheek. “Congratulations on that little granddaughter. I hear she’s quite a beauty. I can’t wait to see her.”

Matilda extricated herself. “Thank you, Beatrice. Karen felt it would be best not to bring the baby out in public for a few weeks. It’s been such a cold spring. We’ll serve dinner at one, if that suits you, Silas.” She patted Silas on the arm and strolled toward the door without waiting for an answer.

Beatrice’s lips twitched. “I can never get over parishioners calling a pastor by his first name. I guess it was the way I was brought up, proper and all, but using a pastor’s first name. . .” She gave an I-don’t-know-what-this-world-is-coming-to shrug.

Silas held in a sigh and vowed to be polite, long-suffering, patient, enduring all things. . . “Mrs. Drabble, I did give the adult congregants leave to use my first name if they wanted to.”

“And you’ll remember I told you I thought it improper. As the spiritual leader of this flock, you can’t maintain your dignity and position if you allow people to call you by your given name. If you ask me, even the term pastor is rather. . . common. Reverend”—she traced an arc as if the word could be read across his chest—“is much more ministerial and fitting for the office.”

Two young men edged around them, heading for the door. Silas nodded to Kenneth Hayes and his friend. The young man had installed the new windows, and a fine job he’d done, too. Silas didn’t miss the black look Beatrice shot Kenneth or the way his shoulders ducked and hunched. Poor
Kenneth. She’d criticized and hounded him during the entire construction.

Kenneth’s friend elbowed him in the ribs. “You going to the grand opening, or you going to wait?”

He shrugged. “I’ll wait a couple weeks till the crowds thin some. Can’t say I’m all that interested in the play they’re putting on, but I wouldn’t mind a gander at the inside of the new theater.” Kenneth lifted his chin in greeting to Silas, edging past Alicia who stiffened and lowered her lashes when their arms brushed.

The friend’s face split in a grin. “I want to get a gander at that actress. My cousin saw her in Denver this winter. If she’s as pretty as he claims, it won’t matter what play they’re putting on. He said she looked better than a summer sky, and her eyes could make a man feel like he’d been gut-punched.”

Silas smiled. All winter the town had buzzed about the new Martin City Theater set to open next week. In a race to keep up with Denver, Leadville, and other Colorado boomtowns, several affluent miners and businessmen had partnered to erect an edifice they felt would elevate Martin City to the status of cultural center. He looked forward to enjoying some of the entertainments himself. It had been a long time since he’d seen a play or listened to an orchestra.

Mrs. Drabble tapped Silas’s arm, dragging him back to her. “Don’t you agree?”

Uh-oh. He had no idea what she’d even asked him.

Someone whacked Silas on the shoulder. “Great sermon today, Silas. You hit hard and fair.”

Silas grinned and shook Jesse Mackenzie’s hand, trying not to wince as his palm compressed in a bear-trap grip. “I just open the Word. I let the Spirit do the teaching and convicting.”

“It beats all how you can take a familiar passage like the command for husbands to love their wives like Christ loves
the Church and bring out something new I hadn’t thought of before.”

Mrs. Drabble sniffed. “I would think it would help your ministry immensely, help you preach those types of passages better, if you were married yourself, Reverend Hamilton.”

Silas didn’t miss her treading heavily on the word *reverend.*

She glared in Jesse’s direction. “I believe I mentioned as much to the search committee when Reverend Hamilton was presented to the church as a candidate. We’ve never had an unmarried minister before, especially not one so young.”

Jesse laughed. “Time will cure the young part, and I imagine if we give Silas here a little time, he’ll work out the married part, too.”

“Not in time for his performance review, I imagine.”

“Say”—Jesse checked his pocket watch—“we’d best be moving along. We want to have lunch over by the time the baby wakes from her nap.”

Silas didn’t miss Mrs. Drabble’s parting shot. “It’s high time he was married and setting up his own nursery. He owes it to his congregation.”

Willow Starr followed her sister Francine up the center aisle of the Martin City Theater. Weariness pulled at her limbs and tightened the band around her forehead, though it felt good to stretch her legs after sitting on the train all afternoon. If only she could escape to the little creek she’d glimpsed from the train window. From long experience, she knew only solitude would allow her to return to the theater refreshed and ready to work.

“At least it’s a decent size, though I never would’ve chosen navy blue for the chairs and drapes. It makes it much too dark in here.” Francine poked one of the new, velvet chairs with her folded fan. “Positively saps the light. We’ll have to adjust the footlights and our makeup or we’ll all look positively ghastly.”
Philip shoved his hands into the pockets of his narrow, striped trousers and rocked on his heels. “Hello! ‘Alas, poor Yorick!’” His voice filled the empty theater. “Wonderful acoustics.”

Francine’s mouth pinched. “You’re no Edwin Booth. Now there is an actor. My mother played opposite him, you know. The greatest production of Hamlet ever seen outside the Globe Theater.”

Willow smothered a smile as the three stagehands behind Francine pantomimed this well-worn phrase. Her sister brought up her acting pedigree at every opportunity, as if being the daughter of the woman who played Ophelia to Edwin Booth’s Hamlet made her a great actress, too.

Francine continued up the aisle, the skirts of her ornate traveling gown falling behind her to a train that brushed the carpeted floor with a whisper of satin on wool. “I see they have ample balcony boxes. After that shack we were booked in at the last town, it’s nice to see a place with some class.”

Willow separated herself from the gawking actors and wandered over to one of the pillars supporting the balconies above. She leaned against the solid post and closed her eyes, wishing away her headache and anticipating getting settled into her room at the hotel and having some peace and quiet. Finding time to be alone had been particularly difficult lately, and she felt like a rag doll with the sawdust drained out.

“Willow, you’re going to ruin your posture slouching like that.” Francine sounded so much like their late mother, Willow snapped to attention before she realized what she was doing. “We need to inspect the dressing rooms and see that our costumes have arrived.”

Philip Moncrieff made his way through the actors and offered his arm to Willow as she approached. “Allow me.” His mouth twisted into an oily sneer under the pencil-thin moustache. With his back to everyone, he didn’t bother to hide his bold leer.
Her throat tightened, and she stepped back. Though she’d suspected from the first time she’d seen him that Philip might be trouble, she hadn’t anticipated how much. Nearly old enough to be her father, he had made a game of pursuing her this past winter, always covertly, laughing at her blushes and evasions and getting closer and closer to outright insulting behavior.

“Philip?” Francine cut through the chatter. “Let’s go see what the dressing rooms look like.”

He rolled his eyes, pulled his lips into a pleasant smile, and turned on his heel, but not before winking at Willow and whispering, “Perhaps later, my dear.”

She swallowed the distaste on her tongue. Walking to the stage, she didn’t miss the whispers from the rest of the troupe. Her sister’s possessive attitude toward Philip was common knowledge. Willow, having no designs on the lecher herself, was grateful. If Francine kept him dancing attendance on her, he wouldn’t be free to make things difficult for anyone else.

Willow followed, pausing to caress the velvet curtains. Even in low light the narrow boards of the maple stage gleamed with wax and elbow grease. Her shoes echoed as she crossed in front of the footlight reflectors.

A familiar form slipped into the theater in the back, and she smiled. Clement Nielson, director and friend, and the only person in the troupe with the clout to override her sister’s demands. He waved and cupped his ear.

Her shoulders straightened, and she tightened her abdomen. “Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity or registering wrongs.” The line from their upcoming play, Jane Eyre, flowed out to the corners of the auditorium. Though Willow was aware of Francine’s snort of disapproval coming from the wings, she didn’t acknowledge it.

Clement nodded and made a damping motion.

Willow dropped her voice to a whisper. “‘I am no bird;
and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will.”

“Bravo, child.” He strode up to the stage, planted his hands on his lean waist, shoving back his jacket, and looked up at her. “I knew this part would be perfect for you.”

Francine glided over, a ship in full sail. “Clement, I hope you’re not making a dreadful mistake. It isn’t too late, you know.”

Willow’s fingers tightened in the folds of her skirt, waiting for a repetition of the histrionics Francine had gone into when Clement first announced the cast for the upcoming production of *Jane Eyre*. The thrill of being awarded her first starring role had been snuffed under an avalanche of protests, tantrums, and petulant criticism, to the point that Willow had been ready to beg Clement to let her sister take the part.

Especially since creepy Philip would be playing Mr. Rochester. The hours she would spend in his company pretending to be in love with him would surely tax her acting ability to the limit.

“The cast is set, Francine. Willow is more than ready. She’ll be a sensation. You’ve read the reviews from this past winter. Even in her supporting roles she’s garnering attention.” Clement bounded up the stairs, energetic as always, and touched Willow’s chin, lifting it slightly. “I’ve never seen a more perfect ingenue. With that face, form, and ability, they’ll be clamoring for her in New York, San Francisco, Paris, London, Berlin. . . .” He smiled, white teeth flashing, and feathered his fingers through his thin, pale-yellow hair. “I’ve only held back until now, waiting for a bit of wisdom and serenity to appear in those marvelous gray eyes. She only lacked a bit of maturity to her carriage and voice.” He clucked his tongue. “It was that tip-tilted nose. Gamine, pixie-ish, and alluring, but without a bit of maturity to counter it, she appeared too young. Until now.”