13. Ballroom Battle

My aunt emerged from behind a potted plant like a vulture from behind a lone desert rock and stalked towards me. I could almost see the sword of just punishment in her right and the scales in her le hand.

"Err… hello, Aunt," I said. "This is a nice evening. Wonderful ball, don't you think?"

But apparently, my aunt did not want to change the subject right now. "I heard from Colonel Remington that you refused to dance with him."

"Um… only from the right?"

"Yes, he… Wait, what do you mean, only from hin! Do you mean to say there are otherswith whom you refused to dance?"

I could have slapped myself for not keeping my big mouth shut. I wasn't usually timid, but in the face of the huge fire breathing dragon that was my aunt, I cowered on my chair, my eyes downcast.

"Err… maybe?"

"Either you did or you didn't. Well!"

"Did."

"How many? Two? Three?"

"Err… more something like… thirteen? Maybe fourteen?"

Watching my aunt's expression, I truly believe that had we been at home, my eardrums would have been in some danger of being shattered by her reaction. However, at this very moment a gentleman stepped up to the refreshment tables and took a piece of chocolate o the platke, reminding my aunt that we were in company, and that ladies did not scream like furies when they were in company.

Slowly, she stepped towards me until only inches separated us and bent down towards my ear.

"If you should be so lucky as to have another deluded gentleman apply for your hand," she hissed into my ear, "you will accept it or I will lock you in your room and throw the key away, understood?"

I paled. My aunt, misinterpreting my look, nodded satisfied. "That's it. No lounging about in the park or in the garden, no going to the library, and above all no meeting with those friends of yours."

All I could manage in answer was a shaky nod. My aunt didn't know the real force of her threat. I had obligations now. I couldn't simply be locked in my room like a spoiled child. If I wasn't punctually at work tomorrow, Mr Ambrose would dismiss me for sure.

For a fleeting moment the idea of leaving home entered my mind – but no. I wasn't even of age yet. My aunt could bring me back and forcibly lock me in my room if she wished. Though if she heard I had le her house to work for a living, she would probably lock me in an insane asylum instead.

I swallowed, hard. There was nothing for it.

I had to dance.

Dance with a man.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-

Six or seven minutes later, a young o icer approached me and bowed. Colonel Malcom – I remembered him from Sir Philip's flood of introductions. Somewhere behind him I could see a few others, among them Lieutenant Ellingham, laughing quietly. "Miss Linton? May I have the honour of the next dance?"

The o icer braced himself for the rebu .

"Yes."

He stared at me, evidently taken aback.

"Really?"

I pulled a face. "Yes, really. I said yes, didn't I?"

"Umm… yes, you did. It's just…"

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Let's just get this over with, shall we?"

The music began to play. Getting to my feet, I grabbed the surprised o icer by the hand and hauled him onto the dance floor, while his friends watched in awed amazement.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"Are you wearing good, solid boots?" I asked.

"Boots?" The young man looked at me with mounting confusion. "Yes, Miss. Why?"

"Because I've never danced before in my life and I will probably step on your feet half the time. I don't want you permanently injured."

He grinned a little boy grin. "That's all right. I don't mind. I'm a cavalry o icer you know? Had a horse step on my foot three times already. You don't think you're heavier than a horse, do you?"

Suddenly realizing what he had said, he blushed.

"Begging your pardon, Miss. I didn't mean to imply that… well…"

Unwillingly, I had to grin back. This might just not be such an ordeal a er all.

"Hmm…" I replied, pretending to contemplate the question. "No, I don't think I'm quite as heavy as a horse. But nearly."

He smiled, relieved. "Then I shall take care with every step I take."

We danced. It didn't turn out to be that terrible. Colonel Malcom was – for a man – relatively quiet and well-behaved. He pointed me into the right direction without forcing me, and didn't complain when I trampled on his toes. When we were done with the quadrille, he bowed to me in a very gentlemanly manner and said with a light smile that this had been a very novel experience.

My next partners were not quite so agreeable. While my aunt watched on from the shadows of the potted plants, I wrestled with various men who seemed to think dancing consisted of pushing around the female like a piece on a chessboard. Whenever they would get too overbearing, I would make good use of my heel and aim a solid kick at the gentleman's feet, or used my fan to prod them in the ribs. This elicited very satisfying groans from the male monsters. In that way, I got though about an hour of dancing. Sweat was beginning to trickle down my forehead. I threw a pleading glance at my aunt.

She shook her head.

So I smiled at the next gentleman and said yes, he could have the honour of this dance. The fight was beginning to go out of me. My kicks became increasingly feebler. A er another half hour, I turned to my aunt again, this time clasping my hands in supplication.

She considered a moment – then nodded.

Thank the Lord! I was free. What bliss.

Staggering to a chair near the refreshment tables, I flopped down on it and leaned back, closing my eyes. Whoever knew dancing could be so exhausting? If this was what you had to do in order to catch yourself an eligible bachelor, I wondered at the fact that not more ladies had decided to try and go find a job of their own. Compared with this, even working for Mr Stoneface Ambrose looked like a piece of chocolate cake.

Could I take o my shoes? My feet ached, and I wanted so much to give them a little room and air. But although this hadn't been included in any of my aunt's lectures about etiquette, I somehow believed that taking o your shoes and putting your feet on the next table wasn't considered acceptable behaviour at a high society ball.

My only consolation, I thought with a grin, was that I knew that my partner's feet would be hurting a damg side more than mine right now. There was nothing so useful to a girl as really solid heels.

"… and abominably rude," a voice made its way through the haze of my exhaustion to my brain. My eyelids fluttered open. The voice was coming from behind the nearest potted plant. I wasn't someone who eavesdropped, normally. Normally, people didn't have anything interesting to say. But this sounded like one of those rare occasions where it might be interesting to keep an ear open. A er all, they mentioned rudeness. They might be talking about me.

"Yes, that is what I heard," I heard another voice, which I recognized as Lady Metcalf's. "But he has certain… redeeming features."

Oh. Not me. They were talking about some stupid man. Losing interest in the discussion, I slowly rose and started away in the direction of another refreshment table. I almost didn't catch the next sentence.

"But can anyone of you said tell me what is so fascinating about him?" Another voice demanded. "I just got back from the country and found that all London is awash with talk of him. I mean, what is so special about this Mr Rikkard Ambrose?"

I froze in my tracks.

Please imagine dramatic cliihangery music here*

Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Quite a number of you, my dear fans, were a somewhat disappointed (<--- Understatement) because it was not Mr Rikkard Ambrose who appeared at the ball to ask Lilly for a dance. So I thought this might be the right time for us to discover a little bit more about the mysterious past of Mr Ambrose. What do you say? Would you like to discover the dark secrets of this mysterious business man?

By the way, if you would like to strangle me for my latest cli hanger, I would just like to point out before you kill me that already famous Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens started out writing their books in episodes with terryfying clihangers, just like wattpad authors do today. So you see, I am simply taking up a great literary tradition ;-)

I promise to begin writing the next installament as soon as I possibly can!

Yours truly,

Sir Rob

Continue reading next part ☐