"Ouch!" "What was that, my love? Did you hurt yourself?" "No, my dearest Ella. Why do you ask?" **133** "I could have sworn I heard somebody crying out." a⁶ "It must have been my heart crying out in joy at the sight of you, my dearest, 3.9K my loveliest Ella!" Hear heart? My foot, more like! Behind the bushes, I was hopping on one foot, my hand clamped over my mouth to prevent any further outcries. I nearly toppled over, but was able to grasp a tree and steady myself. Not more than a few feet away, hidden by the brush, I could hear the so 'swoosh' of a gown gliding through the wet grass, and my little sister's light feet, as she hurried through the garden. "Oh Ella!" "Oh Edmund!" aĸ Edmund? Edmund? Peering between two bushes, I could see my sister standing at the wrought iron fence which separated our garden from that of the neighbours, clutching at the intricate ironwork as though it were prison bars separating her from all she desired in the world. And indeed, beyond the fence, there stood Edmund Conway, our neighbour's son, staring at my little sister with an expression on 246 his face that I could only describe as... besotted. Eew! 217 "Oh Ella," he said again. "Oh Edmund." 172 "Oh my love." **4**7K "Oh my dearest." They had said that already, hadn't they? Why repeat it? What was the matter with them? Squinting through the brush, I tried to get a better look at them. Were they ill, maybe? Well, they definitely both looked slightly crazy. They had silly smiles plastered on their faces, and kept staring at each other like there wasn't a beautiful garden with trees and birds and a lot of other interesting things all around them. In Edmund's case I might have understood that – my little sister was an eye-catcher. But there really was no excuse for Ella's blatant staring. Our neighbour's son was a perfectly ordinary male specimen: brown hair, brown eyes, two legs, two feet, and one head on his shoulders. There was nothing about him that to justify such staring. He didn't even have an 12K interesting hunchback, or a boil on his nose. "You are growing into a real Lady, Ella," Edmund said, his voice thick with emotion. "I watched you from the house when you departed in your fine coach." He watched her? He watched her, the creep? "Oh, it was nothing," she said, blushing, and not even because she was o ended, no! Was this believable? She was actually pleased! "It was not our coach you saw. It was that of Sir Philip Wilkins. He invited my whole family out to his ball tonight." a² "A ball?" Edmund sighed with the pathos of a Shakespearean actor. "How I wish I could have gone to the ball and danced with you. How I wish I could just hold you in my arms once. But always this infernal barrier of iron keeps us **19K** separated!" My eyes strayed from the pair of them to the ladder that leaned, not ten feet away, against the wall of the Conway's garden shed. I was almost tempted to 829 a say something, but wisely kept my mouth shut. "Not only this iron wall separates us, my love, as you very well know," said Ella. There was something glinting in her eyes. Tears? Tears! That creep had managed to make my little sister cry! I was strongly tempted to go over there and clobber him over the head with my parasol, but stayed where I was. My le foot was still damaged from the atlantic collision, and I wasn't at all sure I could make it over there without landing on my nose. 342 **STORY CONTINUES BELOW** "What else can separate two loving hearts?" Edmund demanded. "Ella... I love 918 a you. I wish nothing but to love you until my dying day." I heard a strange sound from a sister. Hiccups? No... It sounded more like a gasp of pain. But why the heck would she be in pain? I didn't see any blood or some other sign of injury. **548** "Oh Edmund, do not speak thus to me, I beg you!" a⁶⁰ **269** "Why not? Do you not love me?" He actually looked wounded. No, more than that... devestated. Slight doubts were beginning to gnaw at me. Either he was a darn fine actor, for which I ā⁶ didn't really think him smart enough, or he really... No! No, that couldn't be. "Of course!" Ella clutched the iron poles of the fence even tighter and her 298 a knuckles turned white. "Of course I love you, Edmund! With all my heart!" "Then why conceal our love in the shadows, my dearest? Just think, it could 128 have been me who danced with you at that ball." a^{6K} "Edmund, please! Do not tempt me with these enticing visions!" "But why not?" The desperate fervour of his voice was beginning to get to me. What if he wasn't just an obnoxious, lecherous rake like ninety-nine per cent of his fellow men? What if he actually loved my little sister? I shuddered at the possibility. And even worse... what if shereally loved him back? 316 "Why, my dearest Ella, should I not openly proclaim my love for you? My family is not rich, but we're well-o enough, and I am, while still young, a 313 a respectable man. Why should I not gain your love?" "You already have it." ä Edmund took a deep breath, as if preparing to jump o a cli into an unknown 208 ocean. *4*15 "What I mean, Ella, is: why should I not gain your love... and your hand?" Ella paled and only managed to stay upright because she was clutching the iron poles of the fence. My desire to clobber young Edmund was instantly revived. How dare he upset her! ä⁷ "Edmund," Ella said, her small voice quivering, "you know it cannot be." a³ "But you say you love me?' a "As a sister would her brother." This time it was Edmund who paled. Yes! Now you know what it feels like, you chauvinist son of a bachelor! "Ella! Consider what you are saying. Do you wish 341 a to pierce my heart?" "I wish I could love you another way, Edmund. I do, I so desperately do. But I **528** cannot." "Why not?" Suddenly with colour in his cheeks again, the young blackguard stepped forward. He was now almost at the fence, only inches away from my little sister. I was vigorously massaging my injured foot, preparing to charge and save her from his evil clutches, if necessary. å "There is an impenetrable barrier between us, Edmund." 253 a "I will tear it down, my love." 198 a "You cannot, my dearest." å "I can and I will." ã⁵ Now tears were running down Ella's face. "How would you tear down our birth, Edmund?" a^{4K} ar4 "Our birth doesn't separate us. We were born as soul mates." "We were born worlds apart, Edmund. I am of the gentry. You, though the **1.3K** spirit of the king may live in your breast, are the son of a tradesman." "An honest and prosperous tradesman. I could support you in the style to which you are accustomed. I would not dare seek your hand of a lady such as **133** you if that were not the case." "Oh Edmund!" My little sister's lower lip quivered so piteously, that I almost started to cry myself. Only the knowledge that this fuzz was all about nothing but a load of romantic balderdash kept me from losing my dignity. "I have told you this a thousand times. The wealth of your family does not matter. It is the position of your family that troubles me. I know you to be good and kind and loving, but that counts for nothing with my aunt, who holds rank and pedigree above everything else. If she were to discover my love for you, the son of a common tradesman, we would be separated and never see each other again." a¹ "So this is it? This is why nobody must know of our attachment?" "Nobody. Not even my dearest sister Lilly, the one that a er you, Edmund, I love most in the world, knows of this, my dark and sinful secret. I have kept it close to my heart and have been most cunning in concealing it from the a^{4K} world." Covering my eyes with my hand, I slumped back into the grass. Yes, most cunning indeed – conducting a secret romance in the back garden of your family home. I mean, my dear little sister, how would it be possible for anyone **536** to discover you there, or listen in on you? Poor Ella. She would have a few nasty surprises coming for her in the real ð world. I lay on my back, continuing to listen to their conversation. Some part of me was expecting Edmund to make dark and demanding overtures to my sister. I mean, he was a man, a er all. But there were only flowery professions of love on both sides. **267** A lot of them. a A really great lot of them. Maybe Edmund was actually a nice fellow. I had certainly thought so before this evening – before I had discovered he had his eye on my little sister. Maybe I should not immediately start to think of him as a ruthless rake. From what I could hear, he seemed decent enough, if a little soppy. Maybe I wouldn't hit him with my parasol just yet. 249 "But tell me, my dearest Ella..." he began, frowning slightly. I raised my head. This didn't sound like another one of those silly love-confessions. "Might we not confide in one person at least? Your elder sister, Lilly I think her name is, of 212 whom you have spoken so fondly?" "Oh Edmund! How I would love to do that, to pour out my heart to my dearest å sister!" "Which one was she, by the way? I have never yet had the pleasure of being introduced to any of your family, I just saw them the other day on the street." Ella smiled. "She was the one that returned your greeting. The only one. Oh, if only I could tell her how much joy she gave me in that moment! How I would love to disclose my love to her, to share with her my happiness!" ã³ "Then why not do it? She might be sympathetic to our plight." I chewed my bottom lip, thoughtfully. Hmm. Maybe, fellow. If you behave. **403** "She might also be a valuable ally, my dearest. The word of so good a lady as you described is sure to have weight with your aunt." å 216 Oops. Not so much luck there, I'm afraid. I looked at Ella through a gap in the bushes. She looked slightly apprehensive. "Err... I don't know whether telling her about us would be the best idea. Lilly is a wonderful person, only... sometimes I think she is a tiny bit prejudiced against men." 2.8K What?Me, prejudiced? Me? "Prejudiced against men, my love?" Edmund frowned. "I don't quite **108** understand. Has a man wronged her in the past?" "Not as such. I think it's rather that she thinks all men wrong her just by breathing." 22K á Edmund looked even more puzzled by this. "Why?" a¹ Ella leaned closer to the fence. Looking quickly around her as if she were going to say something very naughty she whispered, in a voice so low I had to strain my ears to catch the words: "You know, I think she secretly wants to be one. A man, I mean." 379 My mouth dropped open. Of all the ridiculous... I was seriously considering marching over there and giving my little sister a piece of my mind! Wants to be one indeed! å "How very strange," Edmund commented, still puzzled. I glowered at him from behind the bushes. What did heknow? He was allowed to work vote and work for a living, and didn't have to conceal the fact. a⁵ "That's what I thought," Ella said, nodding eagerly. "However, I may be mistaken. And I really shouldn't be saying such things. It is not very kind of me, a er all, to insinuate that my own sister is stark-raving mad. Really, deep ²³⁴ down, she is a very gentle soul." **551** Really? I certainly didn't feel very gentle at the moment! "Then why not reveal the truth to her? She might take some time to get used a* to the idea, but once she got to know me that would surely change." ar Don't be so sure. "Maybe, but... her reservations regarding men are not the only reason for keeping my silence," Ella confessed. Looking around, she continued in hushed whispers: "I have a feeling that if I reveal this dark secret to another soul, somehow it will be revealed to all the world. Sometimes I feel as though there is a sinister figure in the shadows, watching us, and listening to every secret word we say." 2.3K Well, well. My little sister was more intuitive than I would have believed. I had to admit, I rather liked being called a sinister figure. It had an interesting ring **608** to it. So what are you going to do now, sinister figure in the shadowsasked myself. You've just discovered that your little sister, whom you thought pure as the driven snow, is in fact head over heels in love with some man, and is conducting a secret romance in your own back garden! What are you going to 272 do about it? The first thing that popped into my mind was telling my aunt. That would put an end to Edmund's nefarious activities and my little sister would be out of **541** danger. But then... I never told my aunt anything out of principle, and so far it had worked fine for me. Maybe I should be guided by my experience in this case. ã⁶ Besides, looking at the expression on the two lovers' faces as they stared at each other... it somehow made me feel guilty for even considering to bring an end to their nocturnal meetings. Me feeling guilty! I never felt guilty! Even when I did something for which I probably should feel guilty. And in this case I 102 wasn't, was I? I was only trying to protect my little sister. "Psht." Edmund stepped nearer to her. His hands closed around the iron poles, too. Their fingers were only inches apart now. "Do not be haunted by such dark thoughts, my love. No one is listening. Our secret is safe." **560 615** Hmm.... Was it? "We should be talking of happier matters," Edmund continued, smiling at Ella in that mushy way that made me want to find a bucket to stick my head into. "We have so little time together – I want to know about your day. You had a big day, today, didn't you? Your first ball." 227 "Oh how I wished you could have been there," Ella sighed, her voice so revoltingly infused with soppiness that it gave me an intense wish for a bucket and a quiet corner. "I would have loved to dance with you." ď "So would I, believe me, my love. But tell me how it was. Were you much a⁴ admired? I wager all the other ladies were green with envy at your beauty." "No, of course not!" Ella blushed, though actually Edmund wasn't so far from the truth. "Both the gentlemen and the ladies were very considerate, particularly our host." ð She began to tell of the ball: of how they had been welcomed, of how grand everything had been, of how Sir Philip himself had been so condescending as to dance with her. At first, Edmund smiled, but every time she told of how Sir Philip had come back for another dance, his smile waned a little. 385 a "This... this Sir Philip sounds like the most attentive host I have ever met." 308 a "Yes indeed." Ella smiled sweetly. "Only think, Edmund, his attentions still **301** continued when I had le his house. He sent me a bouquet of flowers." Those words, however, did not have the positive e ect on her lover my sister obviously expected them to have. He paled, and took a step back. å "Flowers?" he gasped. "To your house, on the same evening?" **a**55 "Yes Edmund. But my love, my dearest love, what is the matter? You are suddenly so pale. Tell me, are you ill? What ails you, my love? What is the a^{4K} matter?" Looking at Edmund's face, I knew exactly what was the matter. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't knock him out with my parasol a er all. It looked as if he'd already been dealt a blow far deadlier than I could deliver—struck down by a **4**6 bouquet of flowers. "Oh God, no," he whispered, and I could hear he understood what the flowers a meant. Ella was staring at the young man, deep concern and longing such as I had never seen before etched into every lovely line of my little sister's face. It occurred to me that while to me, this whole matter of the back garden romance seemed the most ridiculous thing ever, Ella didn't share that a⁵ opinion. This was life and death to her. 904 a I suddenly knew what I had to do. å a° My Dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, **drumroll** I proudly present to you the first o icially romantic scene in this little book of mine - though probably not with the protagonists you 318 a were all hoping for ;-) How did you like it? Oh, and in case you were wondering where exactly the inspiration for this installment came from - it was from one of my favorite novels of all time, 'The Count of Monte Christo', by the famous nineteenth-century French historical fiction author Alexandre Dumas. Although in his story, the heroine wasn't sittingg behind a bush listening in on the secret date of the two lovebirds;-) å I shall be eagerly waiting for your fabulous feedback regarding what you think of Ella & Edmund's little tryst! :-) Thanks! ã³ **Yours Truly** a a⁶ Sir Rob **Continue reading next part** □

15. It gets mushy-gushy