28. Improving my Skirt

Somebody cleared his throat above me. I looked up to see Mr Ambrose extending his hand towards me.

"Do you need a hand?"

Reluctantly I reached out and grasped his hand. Don't ask me why – but for some reason I had expected his hand to be cold and hard, just like his personality. It wasn't. Oh, don't get me wrong, it was hard all right. But it also was warm and full of life. It felt strangely... good. Considering the rest of him was so undoubtedly bad.

With a sharp tug, he pulled me to my feet, and for a moment we stood very, very close to one another. I was standing again. And yet, he didn't let go of my hand, and I didn't let go of his.

Then I heard a triumphant cry from outside.

"Oh my God! Simmons!" Roughly, I pushed Mr Ambrose out of the way and sprang to the window. From behind me, I heard a hollow thud, and an 'ouch', but I didn't care. "He's getting away!"

Now let me tell you, a hoop-skirt is not the right kind of attire for climbing through open windows. But I was about to try anyway, when a hand closed around my arm. A hard, familiar hand.

"Don't," Mr Ambrose commanded. I looked back at him, confusion written all over my face.

"What do you mean, don't? He's getting away!"

"Yes, he is."

"We have to catch him!"

"I appreciate your concern for the pursuit of justice, Mr Linton," he said, as cool as a cucumber. "Even though you did not really have to be so keen on that pursuit to push me on my backside. However, we don't want to go a er Simmons just yet."

"But..."

"We," continued Mr Ambrose unperturbed, taking his old but very e icient-looking pocket watch out of his waistcoat pocket, "have to go a er him in exactly one minute and twenty-seven seconds."

"Huh?"

I stared at him, flabbergasted. He, for his part, completely ignored me. His eyes focused on the watch, he simply stood there, waiting. I got edgier and edgier with every passing second. What the heck was going on?

"Mr Ambrose... shouldn't we go?"

"No."

"But... "

"No. Be quiet!"

"Blast it, I won't be quiet!" I balled my hands into fists. This was insane. "I've gone to a lot of trouble to find this thief, Sir! And now we're just standing around here while he makes good his escape, and we are waiting for your one minute and twenty-seven seconds to pass!"

"Actually," he said with another look at his watch, "it's one minute and three seconds now."

"What the hell do I care? It makes no sense for us to just be standing around here!"

"On the contrary, Mr Linton. It makes a great deal of sense. Now be quiet and wait."

I was fuming. But what could I do? He was my master, not the other way around. I had to do what he said. That's what I got paid for, even if it didn't make any sense.

With a snap, Mr Ambrose shut his watch – and for the first time, I clearly saw the design on the lid. The sight struck me light a thunderbolt: it was family crest. The same family crest I had seen on the pink letters from the mysterious lady.

"All right. It's time."

Gripping the windowsill, he vaulted out of the open window. In quick succession, Warren and the others followed him. I just stood there, trying to shake o my shock.

What did this mean? Was Mr Ambrose really a nobleman? But why wouldn't he use his... I shook my head. No. Not now. I didn't have time for this now.

Unfreezing, I started to follow the others through the window. It took me two or three attempts, and I probably broke half of the crinoline beneath my dress into pieces, but finally I managed to squeeze myself through the opening. With a crash of breaking hoops I landed on the neighbouring building.

"Very graceful," Mr Ambrose commented from beside me. "Now hurry up. We have a thief to catch."

When I managed to get to my feet, he was already striding along the roof, towards the distant figure of Simmons. Striding, not running.

Simmons, however, was running. Oh boy, how he was running. He already was o the flat roof of this building and onto the next, built right beside it. What was Mr Ambrose thinking? He still hadn't sped up, and he would never catch up with the thief at this pace!

But Mr Ambrose didn't seem to mind. He strode along the roof, his cane in his hand, his six men flanking him, as though nothing in the world could escape him. Getting to my feet, I hurried a er them as quickly as I could.

But it would be no use. They weren't going to hurry up, I could see that now, and I wasn't in the best condition for a chase, wearing a broken hoop skirt and bruises in various places.

With a cry of triumph, Simmons jumped onto the next building. There was some sort of structure on top – the entrance to a staircase, that led down onto the street! He would do it! He would get away!

Then, the men appeared.

They appeared as sudden as could be: from behind chimneys, gables and bay windows. They stood between Simmons and his escape. As soon as he saw them, he froze.

I didn't understand until I saw the giant turban-wearing figure right in the middle of the men, opposite Simmons. Karim. The pack of wolves had cornered their prey.

Catching up to Mr Ambrose, I hissed in his ear: "You were planning this the whole time, weren't you? You sent Karim up on the roof before we went in!"

"Yes."

"So why did you leave me stewing like this? Why didn't you tell me?"

His face remained completely expressionless. "Hmm... I really can't think why I did that. I mean, you have always been so open and honest with me."

"Oh ha, ha, ha."

He threw a sideways glance at me and my hoop skirt, which now would have to be more appropriately described as a hexagonal skirt with severe sartorial malformation. "By the way, Mr Linton, I like your new look. The dress looks exquisite on you. Those tears down the side, and the broken whalebones—quite haute couture, I must say."

"Thank you, Sir," I hissed. If looks could only kill, he would be already decapitated right now.

Up ahead, Simmons had turned around and was chasing back over the roofs. Apparently he had thrown a look back earlier and seen nobody following, and now expected the way to be clear. When he caught sight of the eight of us approaching, he stopped dead.

Mr Ambrose nodded to his six men. They stopped walking, just standing still and watching. He himself took a few more steps forward, until only a few yards separated him from his prey.

"Simmons," he said in a level tone. That was all. Just the name.

The thief looked around him with wild eyes, searching for a way to escape. But there was none. Then he looked down into the street. The few people that were walking down there in the fog had not looked up and noticed anything yet. They were totally oblivious to the goings on far above their heads.

Simmons opened his mouth.

"I wouldn't do that," Mr Ambrose warned. And there it was – that cool tone of superiority in his voice that solely belonged to old aristocracy. How come I had never noticed it before?

With great e ort, Simmons swallowed. His eyes darted to Mr Ambrose, and away again.

"D-do what?"

"You were going to call out."

"Mr Ambrose, I never..."

"Do you remember what I said would happen to you if I heard one more lie from your lips?"

The thin blonde man paled and took a step backwards.

"Mr Ambrose, Sir, please..."

With a few bold steps, Mr Ambrose stood in front of the quivering Simmons. He looked cold, hard, and implacable – a Lord or even King sitting in judgement over his traitorous subject. I didn't want to be in my predecessor's shoes right now.

"The file, Simmons. Where is it?"

The intensity in his voice... again, curiosity welled up in me as to the contents of that damn file. Maybe, if I asked Mr Ambrose again...

The other said nothing, but just continued to quiver where he stood.

"Where is the file, Simmons?"

No answer.

"For the last time – where is the file?" Mr Ambrose's voice had gotten colder as he spoke, and now sounded sharp and dangerous as an iceberg. "You will give it to me, or... or.... or maybe you cannot." His dark eyes widened a little. "The money on your bed... You have already been paid for your the ! You haven't got the file anymore. It is..."

Simmons dashed forward and tried to push past Mr Ambrose. He grabbed the ex-secretary's arm and Simmons whirled around. His hand disappeared under his tailcoat for a moment and reappeared holding a short, but wickedly sharp-looking sword.

I think I gave a shout or scream or something, I didn't really know. Everything happened in a blur of motion. The blade of Simmons' sword came up and would have stabbed Mr Ambrose in the gut, but then it smashed against something I couldn't see, and a metallic sound rang out over the roo ops.

Mr Ambrose sprang back, holding his cane defensively in front of him. His wooden cane? But then what had made that metallic sound?

Gripping its lower part with the le hand, Mr Ambrose pulled at the hilt of his cane with the right, and a slim blade shot out of the hollow wood. He raised it in a defensive position and waited.

Simmons came at him, giving a loud screech that sounded hardly human. Their blades met with a clang. Mr Ambrose held him in that position, blade to blade

"You're finished, Simmons," he said, voice still perfectly cool.

"Really?" Simmons grunted. "What makes you think you'll beat me?"

"He does." Mr Ambrose nodded, to something behind Simmons.

Before the ex-secretary could turn around, Karim step up behind him and let the pommel of his sabre come down on his head with a resounding thud. Simmons crumpled to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

"Simmons, Simmons." Mr Ambrose shook his head and looked down at the groaning man. "You really are a simpleton." Bending down, he pried the sword from Simmons' hand. "That petty stash of money we found in your room – you should have asked three times as much. Considering the trouble you're in now, it would only have been appropriate."

Grabbing Simmons by the neck he hauled him to his feet and more or less hurled the man at Karim, who caught him, and delivered another blow to his head that knocked him clean unconscious.

"Let's go," Mr Ambrose said. "We're finished here."

The unconscious ex-secretary slung over one shoulder, Karim strode to the staircase entrance that Simmons had been heading for. Apparently, he and the other men had come up this way, and had made preparations for coming down again, for when we had climbed down the stairs and le the building, a coach was waiting for us. Not a cab this time, but a real, large coach, with one of those discretely dressed men of which Warren seemed to have an infinite supply sitting on the box.

The coach was parked directly in front of the entrance, so nobody could see us as we climbed inside. I glanced at Mr Ambrose. Or was he more than just a mister? Images whirled through my head... A noble crest... A suitcase full of money... flashing swords...

You should have asked three times as much.

Heavens above. What could be worth that much money? What would be worth risking to betray this man?

"What an extravagant vehicle," I remarked, trying to dispel my dark thoughts. "I'm quite surprised that you would use something as expensive as this."

"I did a cost-benefit analysis," he replied, drily, pointing to Simmons limp body. "And I decided the benefit of not getting thrown into prison for abduction was worth the cost of a coach."

"Very wise, Sir."

"Agreed, Mr Linton. Pull down the blinds."

I rolled my eyes. "You could at least say please."

"I could, if I wanted to. Now pull down the blinds."

The coach had dark blinds on all windows. Once they were pulled down, the interior was quite sinister. It brought back what I had seen on the roof – or at least what I had thought I had seen. Had Mr Ambrose really pulled a sword on Simmons? What kind of man was he, to carry a concealed weapon in his cane? What kind of man was he to deny a noble title?

The same questions, over and over again.

No. That wasn't quite true. There was one new question I had, and one I didn't feel quite so apprehensive about voicing.

"What was all that about?" I wanted to know. "That chasing him over the roo ops. Why didn't we just grab him there in the room?"

Mr Ambrose didn't look at me. Instead, he kept his dark eyes fixed on the unconscious Simmons. But he replied, in his usual curt tone: "To make things easier for us."

"I don't understand. How is having to chase him over the roo ops making things easier for us?"

Apparently not in the mood to give lengthy explanations, Mr Ambrose waved to his hired henchmen

Warren cleared his throat. "It's easier because if we had brought him out through the hotel's front entrance, or tried to drag him out of the window by force, he would have screamed for help. The guests or hotel sta would have heard, and called the police. This way, he attempted to flee, believing that there was still a chance to make a quiet escape. We caught him without anyone being able to interfere."

"Ah." Slowly I nodded. "I see."

Mr Ambrose nodded too. "Exactly. And now..." He took a deep breath. If he were capable of something like emotion, I could have sworn it sounded satisfied. "Now I can deal with him as I see fit."

Deal with him as I see fit.

The sentence reverberated in the air with dark promise.

Mr Ambrose raised his cane and knocked against the roof of the coach. "Take us to Empire House," he called to the driver. "The back entrance. We have something to deposit safely in the cellar."

The cellar? What did he want to put in the ce—oh.

My eyes flicked to Simmons. Of course.

Unbidden, something I had once read in one of my father's old history books fluttered into my mind. What did earls and lords do when they discovered a traitor among their men? If I remembered correctly, a er prolonged torture in some dark dungeon, the traitor in question would be hanged, drawn and quartered.

Oh my God. If Mr Ambrose really was an aristocrat, I fervently hoped he wasn't one to keep up old traditions.

My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

What do you think Mr Rikkard Ambrose plans to get up to in those sinister dungeons deep underneath Empire House? Will there be dark threats? Torture? Or will he just leave it to Lilly to squeeze the info he is looking for out of the captured thief...? ;-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Haute coutureA French term that, literally translated, means "high dressmaking". This expression does not, as one might expect, refer to dressmaking on top of a nicely elevated mountain. Instead, it refers to the making of the most extravagant and expensive fashion available during the nineteenth century. The term is still widely used today. Needless to mention that Mr Ambrose is being a a little bit sarcastic while using this particular phrase.

Sword: This doesn't mean a big, heavy medieval sword with a broad blade, like you've seen in Lord of the Rings. Instead, this refers to something a little bit like a sabre. These kinds of swords were used during the Victorian Age by wealthy gentlemen for self-defense / dueling—or murder, if they wanted to be not-so-gentlemanly a er all. I've put an image of a Victorian sword into this installment so you can see for yourself.

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