46. Secret Plans and Politics

There's no reason to be angry! No reason to be upsettold myself, chewing savagely on a bar of solid chocolate I had found at one of the refreshment tables. Not in the least! It is typical male behaviour, valuing a pretty doll in a ball gown more than a girl who actually chose to go out into the world and do something with her life. And there's no reason why that should make you angry! Not in the least! 479 It didn't help. The chocolate did to some extent, soothing my nerves a bit, but I was still fuming when I reached a table with free chairs, and slumped down onto the nearest one. And do you want to know what the most infuriating part was? I couldn't even figure out whyexactly I was so angry! I mean, it wasn't as though I were entitled attract Mr Ambrose's attention, or even had any reason to wish it. I was his secretary, no more and no less. It's the inequality of the thing finally decided. It wouldn't bother you at all if Miss Hamilton were a sensible female who actually worked for a living and stood up to men and their unjust laws. It is the su ragist in you that has taken a justified dislike to her, that is all. Satisfied with my findings, and very happy about my noble disposition which wouldn't stoop to something such as petty jealousy, I took another bite of chocolate and moaned, as the piece melted in my mouth. Ohhh... 305 The chap who invented this was surely the only decent man living! A true genius and benefactor to the whole world. The solid chocolate did wonders for consoling me. I sat at the table, slowly finding my calmer self again, and wondering what step I should take next regarding Ella and her unwanted admirer. Maybe if I just pestered him a little more... **3**⁵ "Lilly my dear!" I froze. The voice that had come from behind me was unmistakable. It was the chief fury of hell! Turning, I saw my aunt rush towards me. But for once, she wore no angry scowl directed at me. Instead, her arms were wide open and there might have been actual tears of joy in her eyes. "Come into my arms, most beloved niece of mine!" Before I could run for the hills, she had enfolded me in her arms and was pressing me to her meagre bosom. Startled, I hugged back, reflexively. What was this? Could it be that this wasn't my aunt, but her not-so-evil twin? Or a moving wax replica? Those were the only explanations for the abnormally chummy behaviour of the being in front of me which I 238 could come up with. "I saw you dancing with Lord Dalgliesh!" she exclaimed, and suddenly everything became clear to me. This was still my aunt, as she lived and breathed. "What did you talk about? Did he seem interested in you? Will you see him again? Oh, Lillian, don't just stand there saying nothing. You are always so quiet, girl! You will never get anywhere if you do not learn how to properly express yourself!" "We didn't talk about important things, really," I murmured, choosing my words with care. I was well aware that I was walking a mine-field here. "We just talked about, um... mutual acquaintances, that is all." "Wonderful! Wonderful! You have made a great start with him. Now don't lose sight of him, do you hear me? If you can secure him... Good God! That would probably be the most eligible match in all of England!" *A*35 I waited with bated breath, wondering if she would make any remark about my dance with Mr Ambrose, too. But she was so full of my dance with Lord Dalgliesh that she apparently hadn't even noticed what I had done once that had been over. I had to admit that a er a while her profusions on the subject got a bit boring. Not that I had anything against Lord Dalgliesh – no more than against any other person in trousers on this planet – but I definitely did not entertain the thought of marrying him! Instinctively I knew that to him, I was no more than a marionette, just like all the other people in this room and all the people of his company. No more than an instrument to be directed according to his will. That was definitely not the kind of person I wanted to be linked with for the rest of my life. My aunt was just in the middle of a hymn of praise on Lord Dalgliesh's taste in dressing, when I had had enough. Rising, I told her, with a a² more than convincingly faked smile: "Forgive me, madam, but I think I am tired of sitting. I will look about, and maybe find a pleasant partner to dance with." a¹ "Oh yes, my darling, do that, do that! And let it be the right one!" ã² **206** "You mean the richest one?" "Finally! Finally, you understand my concerns! Oh, Lillian, that I would live to see this day..." She seemed about to succumb to tears of happiness again. But then, with great restraint, she collected herself and waved me o . "Go, go! The next dance is starting, don't miss your chance, my dear!" "Certainly, Madam." å As quickly as possible, I made my escape. In a corner of the room I spied a nice, big potted plant. Wonderful! Just what you need to hide behind and take a few minutes break before you have to face the ballroom crowd again! Moving inconspicuously towards my target, I looked le and right to make sure no one was watching, and then slid behind the large, dark green plant – only to discover that somebody else had apparently 153 a had the same idea. Ella stumbled back against the wall, giving a little shriek, which immediately cut o when she recognized me. "Oh Lilly, thank God it's you," she whispered, leaning against the wall and closing her eyes. "He isn't lurking somewhere, is he?" I took a peek around the potted plant. Wilkins was nowhere in sight. 📑 "No. At least I don't see him." á "Thank God," she repeated. "I swear to you, if he tries to stick another flower in my hair, I will collapse." "Oh?" I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you told me... what was it again? Yes, that was it! You told me it was an honour to be courted by such a great noble, didn't you?" å She blushed. "Of course it is! I only meant... I mean... I am very honoured, very honoured indeed. He is paying me an enormous compliment, singling me out like this, and I really, and I... I really am flattered that I among all the ladies should be chosen to be the object of his-" a⁹ "Put a sock in it," I told her with a goodly dose of sisterly a ection. Ella hung her head, still blushing. "You... I..." "You don't have to pretend. Not where I'm concerned. Tell me honest: do you want to marry Sir Philip Wilkins?" å She squirmed. "Well... maybe not very much?" "So you want to marry him just a little, do you? Maybe just his ring finger and his le foot, and the rest of him can stay a bachelor?" Ella suddenly seemed to have an intense desire to inspect her feet. She looked down, avoiding my eyes. å "Um... if you put it that way... no. I don't think I do." å a³ "And what about the rest of him?" She made a minute movement. Among immovable pillars of salt, it might have passed for a headshake. "Say it," I encouraged her. "Do you want to marry Wilkins?" å "N.... n..." a³ "Go on! You can do it! Do you want to marry him?" å "No!" **48** "Bravo!" I rubbed my hands, grinning from ear to ear. "Excellent!" " Excellent? Ella looked up at me, desperation in her face "What's excellent about it? Aunt Brank wants me to marry him!" a² "I mean it's excellent you have admitted it to yourself. You normally don't do that. It's the first step to problem-solving." "Err... and the next one is?" ď I waved my hand dismissively. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Just at the moment, you look like you need something to restore your nerves." "To be absolutely honest... I think that's true." ã "Well then, my dear little sister." I put an arm around her and steered her from behind the potted plant. I already felt better. It had always been that way for me. When I was busy solving Ella's problems, my own suddenly didn't seem as important any more. "I have just the thing for you. It's called solid chocolate. Let's see how you like it, shall we?" *~*~**~* a Ella accompanied me willingly. We were about half the way towards the refreshment tables, when somebody roughly grabbed me by the arm and whirled me around. When I saw who it was, I gasped in surprise. "There you are, strange lady!" "Patsy!" I exclaimed, and then was swept up in a vice-like hug, ten times more forceful than my aunt's had been. With complete disregard for our hoop-skirts, which should have kept us at a respectful distance, Patsy crushed me to her, and from the region of my legs, I heard whalebones groan and crunch. "Patsy," I gasped again, pushing her back and looking at her solid figure, her broad, gru, oh so reliable face. For the moment, all dark thought about Mr Ambrose were forgotten. "Is it really you? What are you doing here? How did you manage to get invited? I thought old Lady Metcalf can't stand you and your modern ways!" a¹ Patsy grinned. á "Well, she can't, actually, but she is an old friend of my mother's and has to pretend to like me. More to the point, what are youdoing here?" a⁶ "Well you know how my aunt is, she always drags me to balls..." "Not here at the ball, silly! I mean what are you doing here in London, here in England even? I thought you had emigrated to Timbuktu or something! I haven't seen you in ages! And don't tell me you've been driving around the park presenting yourself to the eyes of eligible bachelors. I know that's what you've told your aunt, because I came by your house to visit when you were out. But I and the other girls have been in the park o en enough and haven't seen hide nor hair of you! What are you up to?" I bit my lip. á Hell's Whiskers, what to tell her? I couldn't tell her that I was working for a living, could I? Not that Patsy would have anything against it. On the contrary. I was certain she would wholeheartedly approve. But if I told her about my work, I would also have to tell her about Mr Ambrose. And for some reason I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do that at all. a⁷ I opened my mouth, not knowing what I was going to say. Maybe a clever explanation would have come to me at the last moment. Yet before I could say anything, the decision was taken out of my hand by a very simple, very common event: å Beside me, Ella blushed. a¹ "Aha!" Patsy pounced on her. a⁵ "You know something, don't you? Out with it, Ella! Go on!" Ella's eyes flickered from side to side like those of a frightened deer. I sighed. Ella was no liar, and under the unconquerable force that was Patsy Cusack, only one result could ensue. a "Lilly, um... Lilly is..." "Yes...?" Patsy encouraged. đ "Lilly is seeing somebody. But don't tell anybody. It's supposed to be a secret." "Yes, a secret" I confirmed throwing a dirty look at her. "That's why I asked youto keep it secret, by which I meant not tell it to anybody' With those adorable blue damsel-in-distress eyes of hers she threw me an apologetic glance. "I'm... I'm sorry Lilly, I just can't... can't lie about...." My anger was snu ed out like a candle flame under a wet towel. Nobody could stay angry at Ella. Not even the chief of avenging 342 angels. "All right," I grumbled with a shrug. It was to be expected. And it wasn't like it had been the truth in the first place. a⁸ Turning my attention away from my little sister, I scrutinized Patsy. She hadn't yet said a word to Ella's disclosure. Her mouth stood slightly open, her lips were moving without producing any sound, and her eyes were unfocused. She looked like she had tried solving a complex mathematical equation and had ended up with 1009 = 0. "Seeing somebody?" she echoed. "As in... a member of the opposite sex? A man?" 203 "No, a hippopotamus," I snapped. "Yes, a man! What did you think?" "Frankly, I would have thought a hippopotamus would have been more likely!" **207** My fingers flexed. "Do you want me to clobber you with my fan?" a² "No need to get violent. I'm just shocked." She shook her head, dazed. "A man. Fancy that. Lilly Linton going over to the enemy." å a⁴ Reflexively, my chin shot out. "I'm 'not going over to the enemy'!" "Really? Hasn't your sweetheart asked you to shed your extremist political views about voting, working women yet? It'll happen, just you wait. And next you'll get all silly and soppy and start knitting and sowing and saying that a lady's proper place is inside the home." She shook her head in mock disgust, smirking. "And I had such a promising future in the movement planned for you. You could have gone far, my young friend. Too bad you throw it all away for a simple life of marital bliss." I knew that she was joking, of course – but in a way, she wasn't. She really thought I was straying from the path and sacrificing my ideals. 43 Well, I'd show her! With no work tomorrow, I would have plenty of time. Leaning towards her, so that nobody else could hear me, I whispered: "Meet me with the other girls at 10 am in Green Park tomorrow, and I'll tell you what I think a lady should be doing." She looked at me, a smile slowly spreading over her broad face, mingled suspicion and interest twinkling in her eyes. á "What have you got planned?" å "My secret for now." I winked. "Su ice it to say that I have overheard something which might be of interest to our little group of su ragists. We have work to do!"

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Sir Rob

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