

48. Woes of Love

I eyed Wilkins cautiously. "What about my sister Ella?"

"... I have confession to make." He pressed a hand to his heart, either overcome by his feelings or having a heart-attack. Unfortunately, the chances for the latter seemed slim. "A secret that I have born in my heart for a long time, but now must reveal to somebody, or else my heart will burst."

Well, things are looking up. Maybe the chances aren't that slim a er all.

"I see," I said.

He had obviously hoped for a response like "What is your secret? I'm dying to know!" or something equally dramatic. When I didn't oblige, he floundered. But soon enough, he found his voice again.

"I have chosen to confess my secret to you," he whispered, conspiratorially. "If for now, you promise you will reveal it to no living soul."

"Go on." I waved my hand. "I promise, I will reveal it only to vampires, ghosts and other members of the undead community."

"Um... good. Very well, then." He took a deep breath. "... am in love. I am in love with your sister, Miss Ella Linton."

My le eyebrow rose about a millimetre. "You don't say."

Again, he had apparently hoped for a more dramatic reaction. But he seemed to cope well with the disappointment, more than ready to supply all the necessary drama himself. He leaned forward so far that the sunflower almost fell out of his buttonhole.

"The reason I tell you this," he said, whispering, "is, that throughout the entire time I have had the pleasure to know your sister, I have noticed you have taken a most lively interest in the progression of our relationship. You have always been there, trying to help me..."

What?

"... and although your failed attempts at furthering conversation show how innocent you are, how inexperienced with romance, they are greatly appreciated."

This man definitely could never be allowed to marry my sister! There was insanity in his family! There had to be! Me helping him?

"Miss Lilly," he said in a fatherly manner, which might have worked better if he hadn't been just about 3 years older than me. "I am a seasoned man of the world. I have no problem with striking up a conversation with your sister on my own. Have no fear. What you hope for is true: I am indeed pursuing your sister. I am so deeply in love with her I can hardly express it. Soon, a er an appropriate courtship, I will ask her to be mine, and your sister Ella will marry one of the most eligible bachelors of London."

He pressed my hand.

"Have no fear. Soon, we shall be family."

Argh!

Somehow, I managed the ride home without getting hysterics. The situation was far more dire than I had imagined. My only consolation was that Ella still wasn't aware of the fact. But as we rode towards home, even that consolation began to disappear. The love-struck smiles which Wilkins sent in Ella's direction at regular intervals could hardly be misinterpreted, even by one as innocent as her. In addition, Wilkins had begun to suggestively wink at my little sister. Since he did this repeatedly, and without great talent, he looked like somebody desperately trying to get a fly out of his eye, but still, she probably got the message.

The others were no help either. Lisbeth was sad because nobody at the ball had danced with her, Gertrude was quiet, Maria and Anne were shooting angry glances at Ella, and my aunt was still making hints about how well Lord Dalglish and I seemed to be getting along. It was only Sir Philip's presence that stopped her from pestering me for the date on which our engagement would be announced.

Finally, we stopped in front of my uncle's house, and alighted from the coach. Wilkins didn't remain sitting, but got out a er us.

"Do you wish to come in for a minute, Sir Philip?" My aunt enquired, sweetly. She was always sweet to prospective nephews-in-law. The rich ones, anyway.

"No, madam. I wouldn't wish to inconvenience you."

"It would be no inconvenience at all, I assure you, Sir."

"That is kind of you, Madam, but I really must be getting home. I just wanted to say good bye to your charming nieces, particularly to Miss Ella." Taking her hand, he bent and placed a long, lingering kiss on it. "Thank you, Miss Ella. Goodbye, for now. I look forward to seeing you soon again. Tonight was the best night of my life. May we spend innumerable nights like it, and may they each be brighter and happier than the one before. That is the deepest desire of my heart."

Ella paled, and my aunt took on an expression of bliss of an opium-addict dancing in a field of poppies. It was almost as good as a proposal. If she'd had a chain and collar on her, my aunt would probably have chained Sir Philip up in the Hallway until he had delivered the real thing. Unfortunately for her, she lacked that equipment, and so could only curtsy and wave a er him as he got into his coach and drove away.

While she was busy waving, I made myself scarce. I didn't want to hear any more profusions on the subject of Lord Dalglish, or Sir Philip. Besides, I knew now with absolute certainty what my little sister was facing. I needed to take up my post so I was in position when the drama began. Grabbing a book from the library, I sneaked out into the garden and settled down comfortably behind the bushes. Only a few minutes later the back-door creaked open and a white-clad figure stepped out into the garden.

Regretfully, I put my book aside. It had been a really interesting colonial adventure story, and I had just gotten to the best part – the bit where the hero is tied to a stake and the natives prepare to cook and then eat him. But, I told myself, he was sure to be rescued soon, and then a wonderful story would be ruined. Better to stop now and enjoy the drama that was beginning to unfold in front of me.

Edmund had appeared on the other side of the fence. He didn't look very well: his face was pale, his hair unkempt, and his shirt and waistcoat had seen better days, too. My gaze dri ed to Ella, only to observe that she was in no better condition. Her blonde hair was hanging in wild tangles down her back and her dress had obviously been put on in a hurry. Of course she still looked innocent like the new day and stunningly beautiful, but then, she was Ella.

I settled into a comfortable theatre seat provided by a patch of moss from which I could see everything through a gap in the brush. This performance was going to be pivotal for my further plans. On it would hinge everything I would try to do to further Ella's hopes and dreams and smash Sir Philip into smithereens!

The two of them stood there, on either side of the fence, for a long while, just staring at each other with desperate longing, trying to bridge the distance between them with their gazes. Or at least I figured that's what they were doing. With the moon having disappeared behind clouds, it was pretty dark in the garden, so I couldn't actually be sure about the staring-at-each-other-with-desperate-longing-part. They might just have fallen asleep standing.

"Ella, my love," Edmund said in a raw voice.

Ah. Not asleep. So I had been right. And if that wasn't desperate longing in his voice, I didn't know what desperate longing was.

"Edmund, my love," my little sister whispered. Apparently, she was very much awake as well.

"How do things stand?" he demanded.

When Ella said nothing in response, he pushed on: "What is the matter? Why do you not speak? Why do you not step closer to me? Speak, my love! I can no longer live without the sweet honey of your voice sustaining me!"

I suppressed an urge to gag. That was putting it on a bit thick! But it seemed to click with Ella. She opened her mouth and took a breath, preparing to speak.

"... I danced three times with Sir Philip," she answered, timidly. I noticed she didn't step closer to the fence, made no move at all to approach her aka the fellow with the messy hair.

"Only three times, during the entire evening? When he is supposed courting you?" Edmund's face brightened. I thought dancing three times with the same person was quite a lot, but I didn't doubt if he had the chance, he'd spent the entire evening glued to her. "Oh Ella, you give me hope. Tell me, has he lost interest in you, the fool? Has he withdrawn his a ctions?"

My sister gave a little shake of the head.

"No."

"Then why on earth would he not..."

"It is my dear sister." There were tears glittering in Ella's eyes now. Dang! She was talking about me! My dear, dear, sister who protects me. It is amazing. Though she knows not a thing of how things truly stand, of where my a ctions truly lie, she instinctively seems to be able to sense somehow that I do not welcome his attentions. Not just tonight at the ball – whenever he comes, she is there, between him and me, helping me, protecting me. Sometimes I ask myself whether she is clairvoyant, so clearly can she read what I feel. It is as if she could hear every secret word I speak to you!"

Um... Well, about that...

Deeply moved, Edmund nodded. "I have heard of this – a strong emotional bond between siblings who cherish for another the deepest a ction can have such remarkable e ects. She must be a remarkable girl. I wish I could meet her someday."

No problem. Just come around the bush, fellow.

Ella shook her head vigorously. "You cannot! Remember, she must never know of us."

"You're right. She must never know."

I rolled my eyes. Really? Gosh...

There was a pause. Then, Edmund added: "But we have strayed away from the heart of the matter, dearest."

Ella's lower lip began to quiver.

"Which is?"

"Sir Philip Wilkins still pursues you."

"Oh, cruel, cruel Edmund! How can you remind me?"

Edmund reached through the poles to squeeze her hands, and she immediately ceased her lamentations.

"I must remind you," he persisted in a gentle tone of voice. "I must, because we must form plans and find an escape, find some way to forge a future for ourselves."

Her eyes tearing up again, Ella suddenly stumbled forward and sagged against the fence.

"No plans can save me," she whispered. "I have no future!"

Now that was just plain wrong. I shook my head disapprovingly. If people only could be more accurate about such things. She might have a future wherein she would be absolutely miserable, married to a man she couldn't stand and separated from her one true love – but she would definitely have a future. One should always be an ice tyrant teaches a girl that much.

"That is why I said we would forge a future, Ella. You may not have one now, but we will find a way."

"How, Edmund, my love? How can we possibly find a way?"

"I do not know yet. But take heart, my love. With time, we will surely devise a plan and..."

"With time?" More tears running down her delicate face, Ella stared through the fence in desperation. Now, the moon was out from behind the clouds and I could actually see the mournful expression clearly. It made me wish for darkness again. "With time? Edmund, you do not understand. We do not have time. I... I believe..."

"What?" Edmund stepped closer to the fence and grabbed the metal poles. "What are you keeping from me? Tell me! I beg you, my love, tell me!"

"I believe," Ella said in a breathless whisper, that Sir Philip will shortly propose matrimony."

"No! Say it isn't so!"

"Yes, my love." Reaching up, she swi ly touched his pallid cheek with her fingertips. "Yes, it is. I wish it were not so, but I cannot change it. I cannot change my fate."

There were a few moments of heavy silence. Edmund was staring at the ground, his fists clenched at his sides. Curiously, I leaned forward, trying to get a look at his face, but it was impossible to see from here.

Blast! And this is the best part of the drama!

I should have gotten a seat closer to the stage.

Then, suddenly, he raised his head again, and I blinked in surprise. I hardly recognized him. All the despair was gone from his face, replaced by a look of iron, immovable determination.

"Yes you can," he said in a hoarse voice. "You can change your fate, my love. Run away with me! Run away with me and become my wife!"

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My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Today, you've been reading a stored and preserved author's note. Why, you may justifiably ask? Well, at the moment I'm on a two-week family vacation on a small island up in the North Sea, which is a little corner of the Atlantic Ocean at the northwestern coast of my home country of Germany. And since I simply could not bring myself to leave you hanging for two weeks in a row without a chapter, I wrote two installments plus author's notes in advance and put them all into storage, to be published once I'm on holiday. This is the first of these 2 chapters. I hope you liked it! :-)

Oh, and for those of you who have not heard yet, I made a CHARACTER INTERVIEW starring Lilly and Mr Ambrose for the WATTPAD ANNUAL BLOCK PARTY! In case you'd like to discover the answers to some of the questions that have been plaguing you about our favorite Victorian hero and heroine ever since the start of "Storm & Silence", go have a look. Just look for "wattpad block party" and you'll find the story that contains the interview, and a lot more other interesting things!

Yours Truly

Sir Rob (reclining in a roofed wicker beach chair, sipping a cup of tea)