

52. Pinching and Planning

Dedicated to Frank Stewart

My spies on their secret mission were less successful than I had hoped.

"Nothing!" Frustrated, Patsy stamped towards me, one hand on her hip, one stabbing her parasol into the air as if she could stab the unobliging passers-by who hadn't been able to e'er any useful gossip about Sir Philip. "They told me nothing! And I bet they knew at least something about him worth knowing, something really bad. They looked frightened when I brought the subject up, and kept looking from le- to right in a very shi y way."

"That might have been because you stared at them like an inquisitor in a hoop-skirt," Eve pointed out. "You should have been more relaxed and easy going, and everything would have been worked wonderfully! I met some people who were quite eager to talk, actually, and we conversed about him for a long time."

"Really? And what did you learn?" I asked, eagerly.

"That... he is rich, has a long nose and is, of course, fowery."

"What blasted good will that do? We already knew that!"

"Yes, well... I suppose we did."

"Let's face it, girls," Patsy said gloomily, slumping down on the bench again. "The chap has a clean slate. Abnormally long nose and a flower-fixation are hardly grounds on which one convince an aunt to reject an aluent nephew-in-law."

"So what does that mean, Patsy?" Eve wanted to know.

Patsy shrugged, miserably. "It means that Ella is doomed to a life of matrimonial misery, doesn't it, Lilly?"

When I didn't answer, all of them looked up at me. They had all settled on the bench again by now. Only I was still standing, looking down at their inquiring faces.

"Doesn't it?" Patsy repeated.

I thought of Ella, on her knees in the garden, weeping, accepting Edmund's proposition to run away.

"Actually, it means something much worse," I said, darkly.

"Oh my God!" Eve clapped a hand over her mouth and stared at me wide-eyed. "She's not going to poison him, is she? Arsenic in his bacon and eggs, right a er the marriage?"

"Eve!"

"Sorry! Sorry, I forgot. Ella would never do such a thing." She looked down, and for a moment, I thought she was actually ashamed of her outburst. Then she looked up again. "So you're going to poison him, then?"

"You read a great deal too much Edgar Allen Poe, Eve," I said, pulling a face. "Nobody is going to poison anybody."

"But then what did you mean?"

For a moment, I hesitated. Should I? They looked so eager, so helpful. But I couldn't. Deep inside I knew Ella would have died rather than have this particular secret revealed to anybody. Myself could listen in – that was all right, a er all, I was her big sister, and had absolutely altruistic motives. But I couldn't tell a soul.

"Sorry," I shook my head. "I can't tell you."

I saw the hurt on their faces even before all the words were out of my mouth. "It's not because I don't trust you," I assured them. "I would trust you with my life! It's just... well, this is not my secret to share." They exchanged looks with another. Finally, Patsy nodded. "All right... Let's file that under 'very mysterious.'"

I jumped. The word 'file' made me edgy these days, starting the urge to jump up and run for the nearest shelf full of boxes. Fortunately, none of them noticed.

"The question isn't really why Ella needs to get out of this so desperately," I reminded them. "You know she does. We have to figure out how to do it."

"So what's our next step?" Eve asked. "If poisoning is out of the question, which I still think is not..."

"Think," Patsy said firmly. "We go home and think. We're exhausted from running around all morning. We need a good meal and rest. A er all, this Sir Philip hasn't proposed to her yet, and even if he did, there's still the time of the engagement before things become final. We have time to figure out a plan, and now we have four brains to do it, instead of one."

"I could ask around in the neighbourhood if people know anything," Eve suggested. The rest of us exchanged a look. Eve lived in a rich neighbourhood and had a virtual army of acquaintances among her neighbours' daughters. If gossip was to be found anywhere, it was there.

"I could re-read a few of my romantic novels," Flora offered timidly. "Maybe there is something in there not only about how people get engage and married, but also about how they could avoid it."

"Great idea," Patsy nodded. "And just in case that doesn't work, I'll go and buy an especially hard and spiky parasol."

"-.-.-.-"

We discussed our plans for the anti-su ragist meeting, and then disbanded not long a er. I arrived home late for dinner, but so many flowers from Sir Philip had arrived in my absence, that my aunt didn't even make a sharp comment. She was in heaven. When Ella swung a er dinner, I was ready, and followed like the watchdog I was.

Our Romeo on duty was waiting just beyond the fence, an incandescent smile on his face, his arms held out at his sides as if to catch Ella when she would come rushing into his arms. Only when she had crossed about half the distance did he seem to realize that because of the metal barrier in the way, that wouldn't be quite possible, and lowered his arms.

His smile didn't become any less incandescent, though.

"Ella, my love!" He breathed as she approached, gripping the poles of the fence with both hands.

"Edmund, my love," she breathed back.

"How have you been, Ella, my darling?"

"The wait has been a torture. I have counted the seconds until I could lay eyes again on you, my darling."

I felt a sudden mad desire to step out from behind the bushes and ask how many seconds there had been, exactly, but I refrained. It was probably not meant literally. From my brief study of romantic literature at the King's Library – before I moved on to more sensible genres – I knew that people in love used a secret code that modified the English language considerably. Just a few examples:

"You have beautiful eyes," for instance meant "I am distractively in love with you, but I'm too shy to admit it!"

"I hate you!" meant "I still love you but you have to grovel to gain my forgiveness."

"The day has been a torture!" probably meant something like "The day was actually quite nice, but I can't admit it because I spent it away from you and you are the apple of my eye!"

Edmund again stepped a little closer. Any further, and he would bang his head against the iron poles. I wondered if he would even notice. His oh so average brown eyes were shining with a strange light.

"Well, at least now the wait is over, Ella, my love. We are together, and we can finally make plans for our escape."

"Our... escape. Yes, of course," Ella's voice wavered. "F-forgive me Edmund, I have dropped my handkerchief. Wait just a moment."

Letting go of his hands, she quickly turned away from him and bent to the ground. I couldn't see a handkerchief anywhere on the ground. What I could see was Ella's face, white as marble. She was afraid! She didn't want to do this, was being forced into it by her feelings.

Rage gripped me, and I considered ending the matter there and then – but then, while she was turned away from him, she quickly reached to her face and pinched her cheeks, making the blood rush into them again.

She was afraid.

She was also more devious than I would have thought possible. She didn't want Edmund to think she was afraid, and knew enough tricks to make sure of it. Tricks which I even didn't know. Ella, of all people! It made me wonder how many times her complexion of crême and roses which had always been so admired by gentlemen had been somewhat artificially supported.

"Here, I have it!" Straightening again, Ella held up a handkerchief which she had pulled out of her pocket without Edmund noticing it, the little vixen! Quickly, she put it away and put her hands back over those of her lover, a radiant smile on her freshly flushed face. "Now tell me all your clever plans, Edmund! I am so eager to hear them!" His face grew grimmer.

"My plans haven't been made yet."

"But Edmund, I... I don't understand."

"Oh Ella," He shook his head, a sad smile on his face. "Did you expect we would simply climb into a coach tomorrow and drive o into the night?"

That was pretty much what I had expected, and from Ella's expression I could see she had done the same. She was biting her lip and looking up at him, confused.

"Well... yes. Why not?" Her expression was a curious mix of relief because she wouldn't have to flee her home right away, and anxiety because the Damocles-sword of marriage to Sir Philip was still hanging over her. It wasn't easy to tell which outweighed the other.

With the same gentle sadness on his face, Edmund reached up and stroked her hair, just once. When he started to speak, though, his voice was anything but gentle. It was firm and earnest. "I'm not going to drag you o to some hovel somewhere to live with me in sin. You will become my wife right a er we leave, or we won't leave at all. I won't tarnish your reputation." Pain flashed across his face, and he admitted: "At least not any more than I have to."

Compassion lit up in Ella's eyes at his words.

"You could never tarnish my reputation, Edmund. You are the most honourable man I know." Her voice was so fervent that she might have been reciting an article of her faith. Perhaps she was. And as much as I hated to admit it, I had to agree with her. Edmund was honourable. Maybe he also was completely average and boring, but honourableness practically oozed out of his ears. It was a miracle he had found the nerve to suggest an elopement in the first place.

"Still, I will procure a marriage license before we leave, my love. It is the only way I can justify doing this to myself, justifying taking you away from your friends and family, into utter loneliness."

"Oh Edmund! I won't be alone! You will be with me!"

She reached through the fence to put her arms around his waist and draw herself closer to him. Leaning forward, she wanted to rest her forehead on his chest. Unfortunately, something got in the way.

"Careful with your head my darling, the..."

"Ouch!"

"...fence."

Ella rubbed her forehead, still clinging to Edmund. Tears had entered her eyes.

"How is it that everything conspires to keep us apart, my love?"

"I do not know my love." Edmund reached between the poles and held her as best he could. "Fate is cruel sometimes."

As to that, I was rather dubious. I was pretty sure that the fence had been here long before their back garden romance, and that it had nothing to do with fate and everything with the high number of burglaries in the city of London.

"So how long will it be until we can be together?" she demanded. "How long until we flee?"

Edmund looked at my little sister in surprise.

"You sound almost... eager. I thought you didn't want to go. I thought you wanted to sacrifice yourself on the altar of your family's wishes."

She shuddered. "Well... it is taken out of my hands now, so what good would any pretence do? I have no love for Sir Philip. I have only ever loved one man in all the world."

Her eyes fixed on him.

"And although I would have gone through with it, would have given myself to Sir Philip to make my aunt happy and my uncle proud, my heart would have been..."

Her voice trailed o. She seemed to have no strength le to tell of the state of her heart. But her face told it all.

"It is too late to think of doing the right thing now," she whispered, her gaze still fixed on Edmund. "I have given myself over to you. There is going to be only one altar in my future, and it will not be a sacrificial one. It will be the one before which you and I shall be united for eternity."

A tumult of emotions washed across Edmund's face. I couldn't blame him. This was pretty heavy stu. Ella should try her hand as a playwright one day. I bet she would have the audiences reaching for their hankies in no time.

Of course, I was stoic and completely unfazed. I was a completely unromantic kind of person. It was a complete coincidence that eyes started to prick and my nose started to itch a bit. Maybe I had caught a cold.

"But you haven't answered my question yet," she reminded him, diverting my attention from my itching nose. "When will we leave?"

I leaned forward as far as I could. This was the answer I had been waiting for the entire evening. The question the question to which would determine whether I could work on a plan o er of parasol violence, or whether I would have to take Patsy up on her o er of parasol violence. My heart started to pound faster in my chest as I stared at Edmund, the man who held my sister's fate in his hands.

Why wasn't he saying anything?

Why was he just standing there?

Finally, he took a deep breath and leaned forward until his lips were almost at her ear – and whispered something in a low voice I couldn't hear!

I couldn't believe it! He had whispered! The whole evening until he had conducted their secret a air in the back garden in perfectly audible voices, and now, when it would actually had been useful for something to be audible for a change, that son of a bachelor decided to whisper!

Ella's eyes went wide.

"So soon?"

Soon? What does that mean, soon? Tomorrow? The day a er?

Or did she have a different conception of "soon"? Could it be weeks still? Edmund had said it would take time to procure a marriage license, so it couldn't just be a few days, could it? But then why had she said 'soon'?

She only tortured me. I wanted to run over to the man who wanted to steal my sister away from her family and shake the truth out of him, but that would kind of have given the game away. So I stayed put and tried to take deep, calming breaths.

"It's not really that soon," Edmund replied.

Wait? What's that supposed to mean? Is it soon or isn't it?

"I think it's quite soon," Ella said. "I have to pack, remember?"

"Yes, but remember, we will travel light, my love. We have to, in order to get away quickly."

She bit her lip. "You're right. Yes, if I don't have to pack too much, it's not that soon. I think I can manage."

"Arg! This is maddening!"

"If I could, I would leave tonight with you," Edmund whispered. "I've done the best I can, but it still will take so long to get a license... I only hope Sir Philip does not make his intentions clear before then... If he does, if all our hopes and dreams are smashed..."

"Hush!" Ella raised her slender hand, gently touching his lips with her forefinger and silencing him. "Everything will go well. I have no doubt. I trust you, my love."

His answering smile was melancholic.

"I only wish I had that much faith in myself."

"And do you know the exact time of day when we will leave?" Ella asked, clearly in an e ort to distract him from his dark mood.

I perked up. This was something! Maybe I'd know this much at least! Maybe I could lie in wait every day and make sure they didn't get away without me noticing!

Edmund shook his head. "No, my love, I'm sorry, it depends on when I can get an inconspicuous coach to bring us out of town."

This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't!

"So how will I know when it's time to leave, Edmund, my darling?"

"That is the very best part of my plan," he whispered conspiratorially. "When the time is upon us to flee, I shall change the curtains in the window of my room."

He pointed up to a small rectangular window in his parent's house that pointed towards their back garden. "You see that when they are white? I shall change them to red curtains when the time for our elopement has arrived."

"Oh Edmund! You are so clever!"

"Well... actually I got the idea from a book..."

"Clever and well-read! My dream man."

"Am I really?"

"Of course you are! Let me show you. Come closer, my love."

"Oh, my love! Only if you do, too."

A er that, the conversation was pretty much over. I turned discretely away and, listening to the noises coming from the fence, did my best not to vomit into the rosebushes. It wasn't easy. This was my sister we were talking of, a er all.

Well, those were the burdens you had to carry when you were trying to save your sister from disgrace. Once this was over, I would really deserve a medal for my e orts.

Not that I had actually discovered a way to save her yet. And this problem had now abruptly become even more urgent than before. I had no idea how much time was still le before our piano-tuning pseudo-Casanova carried my sister o to parts unknown.

The thought tickened me. Despite her brave speech from earlier, I knew she would be devastated to disappoint my aunt. She wasn't like me, she was considerate of other people's feelings. Some people were mad like that.

But what could I do? What could anyone do to prevent this disastrous turn of events? There didn't seem to be anything that could make my aunt dislike Wilkins, and as for scaring him o in some way, I hardly believed it would be possible. His infatuations with Maria, Anne and even Patsy seemed to have been just passing fancies, but he appeared pretty stuck on Ella.

The question was now – how to unstick him in time. Was that even a verb, unstick? I would have to look that up in a dictionary. A er I had saved my sister's honour and reputation, of course.

I remained quiet a while behind the bushes, while Ella and Edmund exchanged sweet nothings at the fence. Fortunately, I had brought a book with me: one of my favourites, a historical retelling of the story of Jeanne d'Arc, the woman who had almost single-handedly thrown the English out of France during the hundred years war. I did my best to plunge myself into the narrative. I admired Jeanne d'Arc deeply and felt a deep connection to her, not because I was secretly French, but because I too o en felt the urge to chase a er English men with sharp sword in my hand. If I were Jeanne d'Arc, I wouldn't have any problems with disposing of Wilkins!

Finally, the two lovebirds at the fence seemed to remember that there was such a thing as sleep, which was usually accomplished at night-time, and parted from one another, with many apologies and promises to see each other again soon. I waited until Ella had passed my hiding place, shut the book with my heroine's story with a regretful sigh, and followed her into the house. When I entered our bedroom upstairs, Ella had already curled into a tight ball under her blankets.

I lay down in my own bed, and recapitulated my to-do list for tomorrow:

- bring back two books to the lending-library

- refine plans to foil the masculine plot to undermine women's su rage

- save Ella from eternal shame and dishonour

I frowned. Hadn't I forgotten something? Something I had to do tomorrow?

Then the memory dropped back into my mind like a red-hot piece of coal. Of course. Tomorrow was Monday and on Monday I had to go back to the o ice. To Mr Ambrose.

Other memories returned, Mr Ambrose entering the ballroom, Mr Ambrose whirling me around and around on the dance floor with the grace and precision of a clockwork dancing master, strong and contained. Mr Ambrose staring at Miss Hamilton with an intensity with which he had never looked at me...

Wait just a second! Where had that thought come from? Why would you want Mr Ambrose to look at you? You want him to employ you, and that's it! Looking at you has nothing to do with it!

Only, that's little had. If he couldn't even bring himself to look at me, how could he bring himself to accept me as a female, and one of his employees? Yes, I wanted his acceptance as an independent lady, that was all.

Angrily, I punched my cushion and turned onto my other side. Damn the man! Why did he have to pop into my head now? Why mind belonged on saving Ella, and maybe also on saving the future su rage of women from men's chauvinism, but not on him. Most certainly not on him.

So why was it that as I ried o to sleep, all I could think of was the feel of his arms around me, as he danced with me at yesterday's ball? -.-.-.-

The fact that I had still not discovered the answer to the question by next morning didn't exactly improve my mood. I got up at an unearthly hour, went through the routine of switching clothes and le the house. I needed to clear my head, and the cold morning air was just the way to do it.

Besides, maybe I could force Mr Ambrose to look at me at least once by turning up three hours early.

I turned into Leadenhall Street and marched towards destination. This early in the morning, the foggy streets were pretty much empty of people. Thus, the two huge shadows that dominated the street were even more overpowering than usual: On the le, the stark, towering Empire House, on the right the broad, elegant facade of East India House. The two buildings facing o ver the street like that reminded me of Mr Ambrose and Lord Dalgliesh shaking hands in the ballroom. Just as they had back then, this confrontational stance looked almost... threatening.

Shaking my head, I looked away from East India House, and started up the stairs of my workplace. I was being fanciful.

Only when I reached the door of Empire House did it occur to me to wonder how I might get into the building. As yet, it seemed to be deserted. The door was firmly locked, and when I peered in through one of the high, narrow windows, I couldn't see a soul inside. I couldn't even see somebody without a soul inside a condition, I was sure, that applied to many of the men who normally occupied its bustling halls, especially the one who paid all the others.

As I walked back from the window to the front door, something clinked in my pocket. Of course! The ring of keys Mr Ambrose had given me. How could I have not thought of it before?

Well, if I thought about it, it wasn't that surprising. There surely wouldn't be a key to the front door on the ring, not a er the defection of Mr Ambrose's last secretary, and considering the fact that I didn't have the right gender. But it couldn't hurt to try, right?

I stuck the first key into the keyhole, although I had already seen that it was much too small. Of course, it didn't fit. Neither did the second, nor the third, although they seemed to be of more appropriate shape. I shoved another one into the keyhole, knowing already that this, too, wouldn't work, although it looked deceptively fitting. I tried to turn it.

There was a 'click', and the lock snapped open.

I stared at the door in disbelief.

Cautiously, I stretched out a hand and pushed against it. It swung open a few inches with an eerie squeak, then stopped. I pushed again, and it opened far enough for a human being to enter. Maybe I was hallucinating? Maybe the door had already been unlocked?

Quickly, I slipped inside, and faced a vast hall of empty desks. No sawlow-face behind the desk, no multitude of clerks hurrying about, doing Mammon only knows what. I hadn't been mistaken: the door had been firmly locked.

Not letting myself think about this too deeply just now, I turned around, pulled the door shut hurriedly and locked it a er me. Then I began the long ascent to my o ice, my stomach churning all the way. How would Mr Ambrose treat me, a er what had happened at the ball? What would he think of me? Did he think even less of me now, because he had seen me in a dress and been reminded of the fact that I was female?

My hands balled into fists at the very thought. It just wasn't fair that he would stare at this Miss Hamilton like she was the most precious thing on earth to him, while treating me like a piece of dirt. She was just as female as I was! In fact, a darn side more obviously female, considering the rather revealing nature of her dress. Just because I wanted to be independent and earn my living, I wasn't supposed to be entitled to the same treatment as she? I wouldn't allow that! I would force him to respect me. And I would start by giving him a nice surprise.

Since you're so early... How about waiting in his o ice, and when he arrives, making some very smart remark about him being a bit late for work?

I grinned. That would nettle him to no end, I was sure!

With light steps, I crossed the length of the hallway and stuck the right key into the keyhole when I reached the door to his o ice. I couldn't wait to see his face when he arrived and I was already there, waiting for him.

The door swung open – revealing a Mr Rikkard Ambrose, sitting, straight as a ruler, behind his dark wood desk, studying papers. He glanced up briefly from the papers he was reading, his cool expression not altering in the slightest.

"Ah, Mr Linton. You are here, finally."

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

HUZZAH! Mr Rikkard Ambrose is back! And he's welcomed us with his customary warm greeting! :)

Now it's time for some Lilly & Ambrose action, wouldn't you agree? ;)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

P.S. Dedicated in memory of Frank Stewart, one of my noble readers' dear departed.

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