68. Looking for Truffles and Butterflies

Sometime later – in as far as time still had a meaning for me – I stumbled out of the powder room in a shirt and trousers, my feet still bare and my hair damp from the shower. Mr Ambrose awaited me outside, attired in his usual black tailcoat, bow-tie and icy expression. How odd. I could have sworn that he'd just been wearing red, and then... well... significantly less.

"What exactly did you do in there, Mr Linton?" he demanded, icily. He held his silver watch open in his hand. "You spent thirty-one minutes, four and a half seconds under the shower. The average time people require to take a shower is eight to fifteen minutes."

I blinked at him, owlishly. "How do you know the average time people need to make a shower? Do you spy through people's windows with a telescope?"

He chose not to honour that with a reply.

"I only require three and a half minutes," he informed me instead.

"I'm sure you do, Sir."

"People are too lazy." He let the watch snap shut and strode past me into the powder room. "This room is now occupied, and since there is no lock on the door, you had better remember not to come in."

"Say hello to Napoleon for me," I called after him. "And tell him if he's planning a rematch to start with the Ruy Lopez, e4 e5! Classic opening move!"

The door slammed shut without a reply. How rude! I liked him better under the shower.

Remembering, heat flushed through my lower body. Much, much better.

Oh, well, you couldn't expect people to behave the same when they're dry as when they're wet, now, could you? Disconsolately, I wandered over to the straight-backed visitor's chair and was just about to sink down on it, when it occurred to me that Mr Ambrose probably wouldn't like water stains on it any better than bloodstains. So I leaned against the wall and tried to dry my hair as best I could with the towel I had brought with me. It didn't go very well. The floor had it in for me once again, rocking from side to side, making it nearly impossible to find my own head, let alone get it dry.

"Blast!"

I tried to throw the towel over the back of my head so I could rub my neck dry. But somehow I managed to throw it over the front of my head instead, to rub my face wet. I got a mouthful of towel, and tried in vain to dislodge it from between my teeth.

"Blaff, blaff, blaff ... pffff! Blast!"

Finally! But by now I had managed to wrap the towel around my throat. Could one strangle oneself with a towel, I wondered? It would certainly make an interesting headline:

Sparsely dressed young lady found strangled with a towel in office of London's richest businessman! The Scandal thickens! Mr Rickard Ambrose unavailable for comment!

Mr Ambrose would not be pleased – and neither would Napoleon or Alexander. They'd prefer it if I died bravely in battle, I was sure. I should probably try not to strangle myself.

Tentatively, I tugged at one end of the towel again. The beastly thing constricted around my throat, with total disregard for the wishes of two famous historical emperors.

"Blast!"

"Here, let me."

My hand jerked when somebody touched it and I really would have strangled myself had not this other hand gripped the towel firmly and unwound it from around my neck. Wait just a minute—I knew this hand!

It was Mr Ambrose. He had returned, and appeared beside me without my noticing. Well, I suppose strangling oneself is a rather engrossing activity.

He wasn't wearing his red hunting costume this time, or his black tailcoat, though I saw that hanging over the visitor's chair nearby, next to a piggy which was looking through the pockets, in the hope of finding truffles, presumably. This Mr Ambrose was simply dressed in a white shirt and black waistcoat, and, of course, his icy expression, which he probably hadn't taken off even under the shower.

His hands weren't icy, though. They were gentle and warm as he unwrapped the towel from around my neck and pulled it over my hair, which he seemed to have no difficulty finding.

"Hold still a moment."

His fingers worked too quick for me to tell what exactly he was doing, but when he was finished, the towel was wrapped up and around my head in a complicated knot, keeping the cold air out and my wet hair in place.

"Now you can sit down," he ordered, tersely. "When the towel has soaked up most of the water from your hair, get a fresh towel and dry your hair again. Don't even think of starting to rub, just take a bit of hair at a time and pat it dry from both sides."

He led me to the visitor's chair, and I was so surprised I let him do it.

"How do you know how to towel-dry long hair?" I asked him once I was seated beside the truffles-seeking yellow piggy. "Don't tell me you used to work as a hairdresser's assistant."

"No. The explanation is somewhat simpler than that. I used to have long hair, once."

"You? My voice probably contained a bit more incredulity than was proper, but then, I had an inkling I had been doing a lot of things lately that were not entirely proper, and so far I was having lots of fun. I eyed Mr Ambrose's neatly-trimmed black hair with suspicion. "You had long hair?"

"Indeed."

"Why?

"Because I did not have enough money for a knife or scissors to cut it with."

He was out of the room before I could think of a reply. And really, thinking of replies was so exhausting...

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"Mr Linton? Mr Linton, you have to remove that damp towel."

"W-what?"

Blinking, I sat up straight. The world seemed very fuzzy again. There was a man standing in front of me... White shirt, black waist-coat and bow-tie... stone-faced... Mr Ambrose! Mr Ambrose with a fresh towel!

"Here. Take this." He handed the towel to me.

"But you said to wait," I protested.

"You have been waiting. Sleeping, to be exact. But five minutes is long enough. My office is no home for passing drunkards."

He unwound the damp towel from my head, and I, luckily able to find my head again, began to rub vigorously.

"I said pat your hair dry," he reminded me. "Pat. Gently. Not rub like you want to rip it out of your head."

"Why don't you go write a brochure on hair-care?" I grumbled. "I can dry my hair however I want, thank you very much."

After a few minutes, I let the towel sink with a sigh.

"I can't get it really dry with this," I complained. "You wouldn't happen to have a hairbrush, would you?"

He was standing at the dark window by now, looking out over the lights of the city. He didn't turn around at my question.

"Why on earth would I possess such a useless item? Use your fingers. That's perfectly good enough."

Why was he suddenly being so antagonistic? He had been so nice just a minute ago, saving me from strangling myself, and even nicer before that, in the shower... and now? Now he was cold as stone again, and staring away from me. I didn't understand it. Didn't understand him.

"I liked you better in your hunting costume," I grumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Forget it."

I did my best to dry my hair with fingers and towel. Beside me, the piggy had switched to the inner jacket pockets, still searching for truffles.

"Try the upper left one," I whispered to it. "Take his wallet and you can buy all the truffles you've ever dreamed of."

The piggy squeaked excitedly and proceeded to take my advice. I leaned back in the chair with a contented sigh, imagining how it would find Mr Ambrose's wallet and sneak off with all his money to buy truffles in Brussels. Suddenly, my hair felt much drier, and I myself better in a general way, though my feet were still a bit cold.

I sneaked a peek at Mr Ambrose, to see if he had taken notice of the piggy's activities. But he was still standing at the dark window, his back to the room, looking out over the city. In the distance, beyond the glass, one could just see the lights glowing at the docks. Work went on there, even through the night.

"Mr Linton?"

Exasperated, I tapped on the armrest of the chair. "You still persist in calling me that? Even after what you've seen?"

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I could have sworn his ears turned a tiny bit red. So this creature of stone actually had some blood in him.

"Especially after all I've seen, Mr Linton." His voice was as frosty as the heart of an iceberg. "Not," he added immediately, "that I actually saw anything. I turned away and closed my eyes very quickly. I saw nothing at all."

"Mr Ambrose, Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Don't lie."

"Mr Linton!"

He started to turn – then thought better of it and folded his arms in front of his chest. So I folded my arms in front of my chest too, in defiance. And for the sake of gender equality, of course. Glimpsing at him out of the corner of my eye, I saw he was still glaring out of the window, trying to freeze the city of London with his gaze alone. I didn't have a window to stare through belligerently, so I had to make do with the wall, but my stare was nevertheless a match for his.

For a while we just remained like this, glaring in angry silence. Finally, he spoke again:

"I wanted to ask you something, Mr Linton."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"You distracted me."

"I'm quite skilled at that," I admitted.

"Yes, you are."

"So ask now."

There was another moment of silence. Then, abruptly:

"Why do you do it, Mr Linton? Why work for me? Why insist on doing work that is meant for men? You saw that it is dangerous. If you didn't believe me before, you cannot doubt it after tonight. Why do you do it?"

"It was the first time he had asked me this question – outright, without cold disdain, sounding as if he really were interested in hearing the answer. For a moment, I considered giving a smart reply like "Because of the cheerful working atmosphere at your office" or "because I like gun fights". But...

I was feeling strangely drowsy and unprotected, robbed of my usual defensive layers of sarcasm against the masculine world. The truth slipped out of my mouth before I could help it.

"I want to be free."

He whirled around, and I jerked in surprise. I had not expected my simple statement to get such a reaction. His eyes were like shards of dark ice.

"That is it? That is all? You are free. England is a free country. Nobody can hold you against your will!"

I wanted to laugh out loud. But the subject really wasn't anything to laugh about.

"Once I'm married, my husband can," I hissed. Anger was rising inside me, burning away the tiredness that had clouded my mind. What did he know of freedom? What did any man know? They took for granted what women could never have. "I must work to make a living. The only other choice is to give myself to a so-called 'eligible' man, Mr. Ambrose, Sir. For life."

In three steps he was around the desk and in front of me.

"And would that be so detestable? To belong to a man?"

I shot up to face him, not knowing where the energy came from. I was bone-crushingly tired. But I suddenly ran on anger now, and I always had a good supply of that at hand. My mouth tightened, the tired smile disappearing. Woozy or not, tired or not, seeing little piggies or not, I had an absolutely clear opinion on that one particular question.

"I'd rather die!"

A muscle in his beautiful, mask-like face twitched.

"Even if the man... harboured feelings for you?"

At that, the yellow piggy stopped searching for truffles and started snickering. I wanted to throw something at it, but didn't see any ammunition in the vicinity.

"And how likely is that?" I scoffed.

For a moment he just stood there. His jaw moved; he looked like he wanted to say something. But then why didn't he? Instead, he just stood there in silence.

Finally, he said in his most icy voice: "How should I know? I am certainly no expert on bridegroom choice. Still, it would seem a safer option to marry than to do what you are doing."

"Life is not about living the safer option," I told him, sleepily. "Life is about living a life worth living."

"You won't get to live a life worth living, or any life, if you go on like this!" Grabbing my upper arms, he pushed me backwards until my back slammed into the wall. "Don't you understand, Mr Linton? You could have died out there tonight! Died!"

And he shook me, as if he could get his point across by treating me like a salt-shaker. All it did was make me angrier! All right, I admit it also made me feel the hardness of his body grinding and bumping against mine, but I tried my best to ignore that and focus on the being angry part.

I remembered another time not long ago when we had stood like this, pressed close together, my anger boiling like a volcano in me, his freezing cold in him. I remembered what it had felt like to feel every line of his sinuous, statuesque form pressed against me. Statuesque – that was normally a word you used only for women, if you wanted to say they were tall and graceful. But as I felt him now I knew it described him perfectly. It described the hardness of his muscles. It described the lack of motion on his face. It even described his taciturn and stony manner. Like a statue. Statuesque.

The only thing it did not describe was the anger I swear I could feel underneath the stony exterior, in his deep, dark eyes.

What was there for him to be angry about? What was it to him if I died? He'd finally be rid of me, something he had been trying to achieve by a multitude of methods for weeks now. He should be glad if a stray bullet did the work for him.

"You could have died," he repeated. Behind him, Napoleon, who had left the bathroom by now, the chessboard under his arm, nodded solemnly. Blast! Even the emperor agreed with him. I had to swallow.

"I know," I said softly. "I know I could have died, but so could you. So could any of the men who were there, fighting."

"But you are not like them, Mr Linton."

The unspoken spoken words hung like the sword of Damocles in the air over our heads: You are a girl. You are weak.

My chin rose up in proud defiance.

"I can be like them, in all the things that matter."

His icy, sea-coloured eyes wandered from my face then, went down my body, slowly, lingeringly, and up again. I could feel the breathing in his chest, still pressed against mine, quicken as he did so.

"No." The word was absolute, brooking no contradiction. "You could never be."

He leaned forward, until I could feel his breath tickle my skin. What was he doing? His hands, his body, his breath, all melted together into a frightening, exciting melee of sights, feelings, smells and sounds. Suddenly I could feel butterflies dancing in my stomach.

Butterflies? What the heck were butterflies doing down there? I hadn't eaten any this morning, had I?

His silent, stony face was only inches away now. He was so near, so terribly near – and then he moved to close the last bit of distance.

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm wondering how many of you feel the sudden urge to murder me right now? ;-) Please forgive my dastardly addiction to cliffhangers. My doctor tells me they are much healthier than cigarettes.

Oh, and incidentally, please keep your fingers crossed for MaysIjbara, all of you. She's one of my dear readers, who spent the first coins she ever earned on a published edition of my book "The Robber Knight" and then spent the whole time intended for exam revision on reading the entire story front to back. Such loyalty deserves a round of applause (and lots of crossed fingers) from Sir Rob. **Gentlemanly bow**

I hope your exams go absolutely spiffing! :-)

Now... back to my writing before I am killed off by a pitchfork mob!

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

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