On my way into the house I actually had to blow my nose. Had the scene in the garden moved me to tears? Or was I getting a cold? The latter possibility seemed much more likely to me.

I slipped quietly inside and made my way up to our room. As I

entered, Ella, who was sitting in front of the mirror, jumped and tried to conceal her tear-stained face – until she saw it was me. Then she didn't bother. Our eyes met, brown to blue. There was a silent agreement in hers, which, I was sure, was mirrored in mine. She didn't ask where I had been all day, and I didn't ask why tears were

Without saying a word, I took my handkerchief out of my pocket and handed it to her. Hers was already too wet to be of any use. She took it with a thankful expression. Having dried her cheeks, she proceeded

Another kind of silencel mused. The silence of love, where no words

My little sister had hardly finished tying up the laces of my dress

"Come! Quick girls, come! He is here! Sir Philip has arrived, I see his

Ella's knees nearly buckled. I whirled and caught her at her elbows

"I can go down alone, if you want," I o ered. "I can tell them that you can't attend the ball because you are sick." You definitely look like it. 43

"No." Ella shook her head, sadly. "Aunt would never believe it, or she

That was probably true. Our aunt's world order was very clear and structured: social duties came first, sick girls second. Or maybe

Li ing the skirt of her ball-gown, Ella took a deep breath and opened

She was so brave. I couldn't for the life of me understand how one could be so brave and so timid at the same time. Why couldn't she just wait until Wilkins proposed and then tell him Thanks, but no

Well, the day I understood Ella would be the day I achieved my

Over our joined footsteps on the creaky wooden stairs, I could hear Sir Phillip's voice from below. My back sti ened. This was the voice of the dread foe I would have to meat and defeat before the nigh was

At the moment, the dread foe was talking about a new variety of tulips he had recently discovered growing near his country home.

"They are beautiful, the most beautiful flowers you have ever seen, but sodelicate. I think I will have to rescue them before the winter

"I see. How very... considerate of you," my aunt said, smiling one of her brightest and most fake smiles. Now, if they just could keep each other occupied for a few seconds longer, maybe Ella and I could sneak past unnoticed and get seats next to each other in the coach, with Ella in the corner. Then at least she would be save from tulips for

Catching her eye, I gestured to the door, and she nodded.

Slowly, we started towards the door, behind the backs of both Sir

"Winter is such a harsh season, don't you think?" Wilkins sighed. "All the little flowers dead and buried under snow. And in the house, too, it produces such a cold atmosphere. You know, I have long been wondering whether there isn't something I could do to counteract

to help me out of my dress and into my ball gown.

need to be spoken, because the eyes say enough.

when we heard a familiar screech from below:

An extra special chapter as a celebration of the last few das of the wattys! Right this moment, Lilly and Mr Ambrose are in a neckand-neck race with our toughest competitor! If you want to know how you can support Storm & Silence, have a look at the author's

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

note at the end of this chapter! :-)

running down her cheeks.

coach!"

just in time to steady her.

twenty-second.

thanks!

out.

comes."

the ride to the ball.

Philip and our aunt.

would insist that I go, regardless."

the door. "Let's go, Lilly. Let's face this."

doctoral degree in philosophy. Not ever.

78. Competition

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the little flowers dead and buried under snow. And in the house, too, it produces such a cold atmosphere. You know, I have long been wondering whether there isn't something I could do to counteract that, and I think I have found the solution." He sighed, significantly. "I think it is time of making a permanent change in my home, if you	
understand what I mean."  My aunt's eyes flew wide open, practically glowing with greed. From one moment to the next, all her attention was on Wilkins. So was mine – and Ella's. We both had frozen in place and were staring at our terrible enemy.	
terrible enemy.  "A significant change?" My aunt managed, her eyes gleaming.  "Oh yes, quite significant. I feel that I cannot go on as I have these past years. I need something that can warm my heart in the coldest of times. My own little sunshine."	a් a° a°
My aunt's hands were clasped together in eagerness, and at his last words, she almost fainted. "Oh, I see Sir Phillip. I understand perfectly"  My eyes flicked to Ella. She was leaning against the door-frame, her	ä
face ashen. Apparently, she, too, understood perfectly.  "And when will you be initiating this change?" my aunt enquired.  "As soon as possible," the accursed Wilkins said with a dreamy look in his eyes. "Why postpone something that can bring so much	ਰੱ' ਕੰ
happiness to your life?"  "True, very true."  Ella was in motion again, then, hurrying towards the door. I didn't know what she meant to do, run to the coach, or to Edmund, or to	å å
Ecuador, but she was too late. Just in that moment, Wilkins turned around and beheld her.  "Ah! Miss Ella! I have been looking forward to seeing you."  *~*~****	් ස් ස් ස්
It wasn't long before aunt Brank shewed us outside and into the coach. No matter how eager she might be for a little love scene between Ella and Sir Philip in the hallway, she was even more eager for Ella to get to the ball and be proposed to. I did my best to insert myself between the couple, using my hoop skirt to great e ect, but there was only so much I could do. I could not keep Wilkins from sending my little sister glowing looks, and flowery compliments, no matter how much I wanted to punch him in the face.  What the bloody hell am I going to do? If he really proposes to her	ď⁴
How can I stop him?  It was only just as the last of my sisters took her seat in the coach that I glimpsed the possible answer, out in the street. An answer in human form.	<b>4</b> 55
By George!  He was standing at the little gate which separated the flowerbeds in front of his parent's house from the cobblestones. His face looked pale and gaunt in the light of the gas lamps, though I thought it might have looked pale and gaunt tonight in any sort of lighting. Edmund Conway stood erect, like a man about to be summoned to his execution, and stared over at the coach. I knew exactly who he was looking it: Ella and Wilkins. Judge and Executioner.	<i>₹</i> 95
All of a sudden, pity welled up inside me for this young man. I had no idea where it was coming from. It certainly wasn't usual for me to feel pity for any man, much less one that was conducting an illicit a air with my little sister in the back garden. But the feeling was there. And, as is always the case with these blasted feelings I have, it led to an	
impulsive action.  "Mr Conway!" I waved at him energetically, plastering a broad smile on my face. "How nice to see you. What brings you out at such a late hour?"	å¹ å°
I had called quite loudly, loud enough so neither he nor anyone else could ignore it. Hesitantly, he detached himself from the garden gate and came towards us.  "I was watching the stars," he said, his gaze fastening on Ella's face.	~
I bet you were. Two particularly bright, blue stars, hmm?  "What a happy coincidence you're here," I proclaimed, before my aunt, who looked like she'd eaten a wagonload of lemons, could say otherwise. "I was just thinking about how we have an empty seat in our coach and how it would be a pity to waste it. We're all going to a ball tonight. Have you heard about it? A grand a air at Lady Metcalf's. Would you like to come with us?"  I might as well have hit him in the head with an iron cudgel. The	<b>4</b> 67 14 <sup>4</sup> K
e ect that would have produced would have been similar to that of my words. Maybe it would even have been kinder. The colour drained from his face and he staggered back a step. "C-come with you?"	ස් ස් ස්
"Tosh! Lilly, how can you talk such nonsense?" My aunt cut in. "It is not our coach, it is Sir Phillip's. You cannot simply invite this" She regarded Edmund with her nostrils. "this young person into a carriage that does not belong to you."	<b>280</b>
Sir Philip smiled brightly. "Oh, but I would be delighted to take Mr What was your name again, Sir? I'm afraid we haven't been properly introduced."  "Mr Conway, may I introduce you to Sir Philip Wilkins, a friend of the family," I said before anybody else could open their mouth. "Sir Philip, this is Edmund Conway, one of our neighbours."  "Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr Conway." Sir Philip gave	<b>&amp;</b> 88 <b>∆</b> 82
an awkward sitting bow. The flower in his buttonhole almost dropped out.  "L-likewise, Sir Philip," Edmund mumbled and returned the bow sti ly.	å° å⁴
"As I was about to say," Sir Philip said to my aunt and me, smiling broadly, "I would be delighted to take Mr Conway. Lady Metcalf said I could bring as many friends as I wished, and such a charming young man would make an excellent addition to our party, don't you think?" My aunt would have rather swallowed broken glass than admit that the son of a humble piano tuner could be charming company. But she also was not about to disagree with the only member of the nobility who was a potential nephew-in-law.	Ŭ.
"Mhm," she said, which le things pretty much open to interpretation.  "What do you think, Miss Ella?" Wilkins said, directing his smile at my little sister. "Don't you think our friend here seems like charming company?"  Ella swallowed, hard. Her eyes met those of Edmund.	a² æ°
"Yes," she whispered.  That was all.  Just the one word – but it was su icient.  Sir Philip clapped his hands. "Excellent. Get in, Mr Conway."	ਤ ਬਾਂ ਫਾਂ ਫਾਂ
"But but I"  "You don't have other plans, do you?"  "No, I"	් ස් ස්
"Well, then, what are you waiting for. Let's go and enjoy ourselves!"  *~*~*****	ਬੌ ਫੈ ਫੈ ਫੈ
Let me say right now that on the right to Lady Metcalf's residence, Edmund didn't look as though he were enjoying himself. He had mentioned once that it was one of his heart's deepest desires to attend a ball with Ella, his love – but I guess in none of his fantasies his rival, Ella's probable future husband, had sat with them in the coach.  I'm not an expert on romance, but I suppose something like that	<b>å⁴</b>
dampens the ardour of even the most determined Casanova.  "Tell me, Mr Conway," Wilkins, who was completely oblivious to the icy silence in the calch, asked with a bright smile. "Where are your family's estates?"	a a
If he had wanted to pick a question to make the other young man despise him even more, he could not have chosen better.  "My family does not have any estates," he said, stily. "My father practices a trade."  "A trade? How interesting." Wilkins' smile didn't waver. "What kind of	å ä
trade, exactly?"  "My father is a piano-tuner."  A snort could be heard from the corner in which Maria sat. And for the first time in my life, I saw my sweet little sister Ella throw somebody a murderous look. Wilkins, for his part, continued his babbling,	đ
completely unaware of the icy stares he received. He seemed to be fascinated by the whole subject of piano-tuning. Apparently, before tonight he had thought pianos just sounded the same all the time by themselves.  "You never cease to learn," he remarked. "Pianos seem to be like flowers, in a way. Flowers have to be taken care of regularly, too, or	<i>∄</i> 7
they shrivel."  "But unlike pianos," Edmund pointed out, "flowers cannot make music."  "True, very true. A pity that is. If they could, they would be perfect."  Ella sneaked a quick glance at Edmund, who was looking out of the	a <sup>K</sup> aff
window. "Nothing in this world is perfect," she said in a sad, quiet voice.  I thought she had hit the nail on the head with that. But Wilkins, the blasted son of a bachelor, leaned forward, took her hand and pressed a light kiss on the back of it.	35°
"Apart from your beauty, fair lady," he said with a wink.  From the corner were Edmund sat, I heard a gagging noise. I was beginning to ask myself whether bringing him along had really been such an ingenious idea.	a 828 83
But when we drew up in front of Lady Metcalf's house and climbed out of the carriage, and I saw Ella looking at him as if there was no other man in the world, I knew I couldn't nothave brought him along. From inside the house, I could hear the musicians try the first notes of music. On Ella's face, I could read her emotions as plainly as if they were written in a book: she was at a ball, and Edmund was with her. If only he could come to her, take her in his arms and dance till the night turned into morning	a <sup>7</sup>
Setting his jaw, Edmund took a determined step towards her.  "Ah, there you are, Miss Ella!" Smiling broadly, Wilkins appeared at Ella's right elbow, o ering her his arm. "Shall we go in?"  Edmund stopped in his tracks.	ਰ ਰੈ ਰੈ
Ella looked at her lover for a moment longer, then she wrenched her gaze away from his and faced the house again.  "Yes," she said. "Let's go."  At the door to the ballroom, Lady Metcalf awaited us.  "Sir Phillip," she trilled, clapping her pudgy hands together. "How	් ් ්
wonderful to see you again!" She didn't mention that it was wonderful to see the rest of us. But then, considering that none of us was titled or rich, it probably wasn't, for her.  Suddenly, I realized that Wilkins, busy with greeting Lady Metcalf, had had to let go of Ella's arm. Quickly, I slipped in between them and took Ella's hand with a firm grip. She looked up at me, a world of	ä
thanks shining in her eyes.  "Please, come in." With a false smile directed at all of us, the lady of the house waved us towards the open door. "The first dance will start very soon, I believe."  Sir Philip nodded and reached for Ella's hand – only to find that it had, by instant-sister-transfer, been moved to a safe distance, along with the rest of her. Confused, he blinked up at us, standing three	a°
paces away, then smiled his gu in smile again and started towards us.  "Please, Lilly," a hurried whisper shot out of Ella's mouth. "Please don't let me alone with him. I can't explain why, right now, but I don't want to be alone with him. Please"	ä¹ å°
She didn't have to say another word. I was already dragging her through the door and into the ballroom.  Bright light exploded in a magnificent scene in front of us. A er the dim light of the street lamps outside, we both had to pause and blink for a moment, until our eyes got used to the sparkling scene in front of us: crystal chandeliers shining in the candlelight, women in brightly coloured-dresses, men in glossy black evening ware, and large windows which, with the black night outside, worked like	a å
mirrors and made the room seem twice as large, the guests twice as multifarious.  "quite the society event," we heard Lady Metcalf's voice from behind us. "Important people from all over England have come, gentry, military, knights of the order of the garter even one of the Peers of the Realm has been kind enough to accept my invitation."	₫°
"Yes, Lady Metcalf," came Wilkins' reply. "I'm sure it's magnificent. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go a er Miss"  "Quick!" I hissed, and pulled Ella to the le, into a throng of people gathered around some painting, a recent addition to Lady Metcalf's collection. There wasn't a single flower on the painting, so I was inclined to think that Sir Philip wouldn't be likely to join the crowd of admirers.  Ella slid behind a column le to the painting and sank against it, not	a <sup>6</sup>
being able to support her weight anymore on her legs alone.  "Dear God, Lilly," she sighed. "Thank you! I I don't know what I would do if he caught me alone. I"  She watched me with wide, fearful eyes, unable to find the words to explain.  "It's quite all right," I said, patting her shoulder with a reassuring smile on my face. "I wouldn't like to spend all night in the company of	
such a nincompoop, either."  She gave me a grateful smile.  "Yes, that's all. I just feel uncomfortable with him."  "Don't you worry. I'll keep you safe."	ස් ් ස් ස්
Taking my hand, she pressed it, just for a moment, then let it go again.  "I know," she whispered.  There was a moment of companionable, or should I say sisterly, silence. Around us, people discussed Dürer's particular style. I for my	a⁰ a¹
silence. Around us, people discussed Dürer's particular style. I for my part had no idea what his style was, if he had one at all, and if he had, what he did with it. But I really didn't care. All I cared about was that Ella was with me, and for the moment, she was save.  "Lilly?" Ella's voice was quiet.  "Hmm?" I answered, trying to pear over the heads of the crowd to	at² at²
spot whether Sir Philip was closing in.  "Why did you ask Ed— I mean Mr Conway to accompany us?"  I stopped trying to pear, and started trying to think of an answer very, very quickly.  "Well I knew you weren't that fond of Sir Philips attentions. So I thought if I'd ask somebody else along, somebody Sir Philip didn't know yet, maybe he would keep him busy for the night and you	් ස්° ස්
wouldn't be bothered." I shrugged. "Sorry it didn't work."  "Oh. That's all?"  "Yes. Why?"  Ella seemed to relax. "Nothing. I was just curious."	ේ ස් ස්
Nothing my foot	454

"Well," I added teasingly, "I had hoped this Mr Conway might be fond of flowers. In that case, he'd certainly distracted Sir Philip for the

That actually brought a little smile to Ella's face. "No, he doesn't like

"What did you say?" I asked, pretending not to have heard her slip.

She looked away from me, to the le. I followed her gaze and saw Edmund standing with his back towards us, staring out of one of the enormous windows into the black night. The yearning in Ella's eyes

What would it be like thought shot through my head, to care about another person so completely that you couldn't live without

The image of a face appeared in my mind—cold, hard, forbidding and so completely unreachable. I shoved the image away with all my

To hell with it! To hell with him Would it would be like to care about a man? I didn't ever intend to find out! If this tragedy of Ella's had taught me anything, it was that men brought nothing but trouble.

My head whipped around. There he was – Sir Philip Wilkins, the evil one. Why had I let my guard down? Why had I let my thoughts

I started forward, to place myself before my sister. But then,

With a few steps, Wilkins was in front of my sister, and bowed.

"My dear Miss Ella. May I ask for the honour of your hand for the first

Was it only I who thought there had been a slight pause before the

There was a thump, and a muttered curse from the le . If I was not very mistaken, Edmund had just tried to punch through the wall.

Wilkins, oblivious to both him and me, took Ella's shivering hand and lead her o onto the dance-floor, as the first notes of the Quadrille floated through the ballroom. Ella threw a look over her shoulder, a last, long, desperate look, in answer to which I could do nothing but

Rage thundering within me, I stared a er the fiend as he led my poor little sister o to her doom. Why hadn't I thought of this before? I could protect her while we just standing around, put myself as a barrier between him and her – but as soon as the dancing started, that was over. I couldn't interfere on the dancefloor, not without making a scandal that would ruin my little sister's reputation.

Was he going to propose now? Could you propose while dancing with a lady? You had to kneel down to propose, didn't you? I had to admit, I had little experience in the matter. Any man who had ever dared to fancy me had been chased away long before he got that far. Could you kneel down while dancing, or would the other dancers trip over

Such questions and a million more assaulted me as I tried to burn a hole into blasted Wilkins' back with the sheer force of my gaze. This man was going to ruin the life of my beloved sister! Oh, if only this weren't a ballroom. If only I were in alone with him, and had a parasol

with a nicely sharpened tip in my hands, I would...

THE BIG CLIMAX OF THE WATTYS IS APPROACHING!

All wonderful fans of Sir Rob gather round! Would you like to support "Storm and Silence" in this year's Wattys & help our favorite Victorian couple to victory? Here's how we can do it:

2. Go to my Twitter page at http://twitter.com/TheSirRob

this happens to be my username on Twitter).

(accessible via this link, or you can just Google "TheSirRob", since

3. Retweet the tweet which you'll find pinned to the very top of my Twitter profile at the moment. You'll be easily able to identify it by the #MyWattysChoice tag which I included in the tweet's text. Plus, there's a picture included just below the text asking for

your assistance, requesting your aid in this year's Wattys.

All the dierent writers who are taking part in this year's Wattys will be be posting such tweets, and the one who, in the end, manages to get the most tweets and retweets, will end up being victorious in the great competition. So please retweet like the

That was pretty much everything! By following the procedure outlined above, you have successfully cast your vote in the Wattys

2015! Congratulations! :-) Oh, and incidentally, if you don't happen to have a Twitter account at this time but would still like to cast your vote, you can create an account quite easily at this

Thanks you very much for your great support! Go, Lilly, go!:) Get

Continue reading next part □

have to stop you."

1. Sign into Twitter.com.

dickens, my fabulous fans!

https://twitter.com/signup

web address:

the prize!:-)

**Yours Truly** 

Sir Rob

"Excuse me?" I heard a man's voice from behind me. "Are you

intending to murder him in a dark alley later on? If so, I'm afraid I will

Then Wilkins spoke to her, and she looked away from me.

something else started, quicker than me: the music.

was so immense, it hurt to watch. Quickly, I looked away.

Nothing my foot!

entire night."

flowers, they give him hayfev-"

"N-nothing. Nothing, really."

them? To care about a man?

"Ah! Miss Ella! There you are."

wander? Now he had discovered us.

words "for the first dance?"

Ella shivered like an aspen.

"Y-yes, Sir Philip. Of course."

look back, helplessly.

Blast!

Trouble, and too many bouquets of flowers.

She clamped her hand over her mouth.

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