tall young man with long, curly dark brown hair. He wore an easy smile on his face and a triangular patch of beard on his chin that wasn't really a beard, just a statement: look, I can grow hair here, if I 3K "W-what did you mean? Who... who do you think I was looking at?" 45 "Old Flip over there." He nodded towards where Sir Philip and Ella were dancing. Did he mean Sir Philip? But I could have sworn that wasn't what he said. 227 "Who?" á "Flip. Well, Sir Philip to you, probably. Are you planning to assassinate him? You looked like you were. So I thought I'd ask. I'm his friend, you see, and friends usually try to prevent that sort of thing – their friends getting assassinated, that is, Always such a messy business, and funeral costs are steep these days." 1-9K I shook my head, having no clue what to say to that - particularly considering I wasn't even supposed to talk to this man. You weren't supposed to talk to anybodyunless you knew them, and had been introduced to them. That's how society worked ä¹ Who... who are you?" I finally managed. **3**4 "Oh, I am so sorry." His smile widened and he gave a snappy bow that made his mahogany locks fly. "My name is Carter, Captain James Carter to be precise. I apologize for accosting you thus without being formerly introduced, but when there is something important at stake, like the impending violent slaughter of a close friend, I tend to forget social niceties. I looked back between Wilkins on the dance-floor and this fine specimen of military manhood in front of me. You are a friend of Sir Philip's?' 40 "I believed I already mentioned that, yes." af69 My eyes, which had been fixed on his face before, wandered down to take in the rest of him. He didn't look like the average man, exactly. For starters, he wasn't wearing uniform—very strange for military men who generally used their shiny red coats to attract silly girls like flies. Instead he was wearing a dark blue tailcoat and beneath it a waistcoat decorated with... ≉ đ⁶ "Your waistcoat has tigers on it." I said. "Golden tigers" "Ah, yes!" His smile widened, as if I could not have hit upon a subject that suited him more. "Do you like it?" "Um... it's nice. The tigers look very... shiny." He thrust out his chest. "Fabulous, aren't they. I've had a French ₽₹K dressmaker stitch one on for every tiger I killed on Safari." My eyes snapped up to his face again, narrowed. "Really?" a "No, not really. It's just some story I tell people when I meet them first to see whether they fall for it." 2₄6K "And do they?" a "Generally, no." He sighed. "I have no idea why. A er all, I am the ä⁴ image of a fierce tiger hunter." "Excuse me, Sir, but..." భ "Ves?" á "Are you drunk?" 'Not yet. But I hope will change as the evening progresses." Relaxing his stature, he rubbed his hands together. "Now, back to business. We were talking about your plans to assassinate my friend." 920 I took a step back. Either this man was drunk in spite of denial, or, the more worrying possibility, he was absolutely sober. In which case he was probably stark-raving mad. 234 "I don't have any plans to assassinate your friend!" å⁵ "Don't you? So that look that said you'd like to ram a knife into his back, you give that to everybody?" I promptly gave it to him, which seemed to amuse him to no end. He .623 "I see. May I have the honour of learning your name, Miss, so I can 503 "I," I said, with as much disdain as I could pack into my voice, "am Miss Lillian Linton." Unfortunately, there wasn't as much disdain in my voice as I'd hoped, which probably came from the fact that some part of me was rather amused by the stranger and his waist full of tigers. "And I assure you, I have no intention of murdering Sir Philip. Why would I? He is courting my sister! a³ "Well, that alone would be a good reason," Captain Carter said, cheerfully. <u>8</u>72 My mouth dropped open. ន់ "I- I thought he was your friend!" ₫³ "He is He's also the higgest nincompoon between here and Yorkshire. I pity the lady who links her life with him. But fortunately, that's not going to happen any time soon." At that, my face suddenly became deadly serious again. For a moment, this strange man had distracted me, but now it all came rushing back - Flla Wilkins, the approaching proposal ď "Did I say something wrong?" Captain Carter inquired, obviously noticing my dark mood. á⁵ "Not as such," I mumbled. "It's just that I think you're wrong." ਕੰ "Wrong? Wrong in what way?" å "In supposing that your friend would not marry for a long time." a "Why? Has he finally found a victim?" 483 I scowled at him. His amused, cavalier attitude made my blood boil. "Of course! Didn't I just say he was courting my sister? He wants to marry her!' ď "You said he was courting her all right," he agreed. "But the one doesn't necessarily imply the other. Not with him, anyway, đ° I blinked, taken aback, the anger going out of me. "What the heck is that supposed to mean?' á "That's supposed to mean that if old Flip had married every woman he'd ever courted, he'd have a harem to rival that of King Tamba of <u>694</u> "Who?' đ "King Tamba of Banares. He was a 6th century king in India, and according to some of the Hindu legends he had a city of sixteenthousand women available to fulfil his every— Hastily, I interrupted him before he could go into any more detail. "I don't care about any King Tamba! Are you seriously suggesting that Sir Philip Wilkins does not intend to marry my sister a er courting her for several weeks?' á1 ಚ "But he has come to her house practically every day!" đ "A man has to spend his time in some way, doesn't he?" 34 "He sent her flowers! Masses of flowers!" នាំ "He is a passionate botanist. Maybe you have noticed he likes flowers in general?" **3**16 " Likesis not the word I would have chosen, Captain Carter." 40 His lips twitched Apparently, he really did know Sir Philip, At least well enough to know his interests ď "Quite. Well, it didn't take him long to discover that men don't tend to share his passion. He tried presenting a few men with flowers, and they either stared at him coldly or threw him out of the house. Women, on the other hand, are always delighted when he gives them flowers. Poor chap, I haven't brought myself to disillusion him about the reason. Better let him think that England is full of botanically interested ladies " 834 I shook my head. This just couldn't be. A er all the worry, all the scheming, hope, despair... no. It just couldn't be! a⁴ "But he is in love with her!" I blurted out. What was I doing? One never was supposed to be this blunt with a new acquaintance—not even me. But I couldn't seem to stop myself. "He told me as much! He told me he loved her.' "Oh, he probably does." Captain Carter waved his hand airily, as if this were of no great concern. "He is rather fond of being in love, particularly if the lady in question has bright blue eyes. But a er a week or two, he'll meet a new lady, and fall in love with her again, just as he'll find a new flower to interest himself." 828 My mouth popped open ď "That's why we – his old university friends, I mean – call him Sir Flip," Captain Carter added with a nostalgic smile. "We came up with the eyes on a dierent lady every five days or so. It was rather amusing to watch, though it could get a little confusing at times." "That... that is horrible!" đ "No," the Captain disagreed, cheerfully. "It would be, if he were as stunningly handsome as my good self. But being such a colossal gu in, it's not really something to worry about. I mean, can you see any Lady he falls in love with actually returning the favour? Be I threw a dubious look at Sir Philip, and cleared my throat. "It... it still å² "Well, it's not as if he does it on purpose, Miss Linton. I assure you, he's perfectly convinced each time that he's found the women of his dreams." He shrugged. "And then he wakes up. As I said, since he's not exactly a Don Juan, it's not really something to worry about." Again, I didn't know what to say. I stared aimlessly at the tigers on the waistcoat and thought: For nothing. All my worry has been for nothing. Or had it? This was all so insane. It couldn't really be true, could it? ď anymore. "Unless your sister really doeshave true a ection for my friend. In that case, Miss Linton, I'm afraid that your sister will have to ð "No!" Before I knew what had happened, my head had started to shake itself. "No. No, no, no, no, and no again. She doesn't. Never has, never will. Not in this life or the next. He breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank the Lord. I'd hate for the old fruitcake to make the front page of the times for breach of promise.' "Um... forgive me, but you don't speak very highly of your friend." "A friend's prerogative." He winked at me, and I wanted to smile in return. Immediately, I clamped down on the feeling. This was no time <u></u>618 "But you can't be serious," I repeated my earlier doubts. "You can't really mean that he doesn't mean to marry her. ď "He might, at the moment. But I assure you, the fancy will leave him ð I should have been relieved. I should have been ecstatic. But to be honest, some part of me was actually insulted and disbelieving, not able to take it that anybody would so callously throw aside my little sister, even if being thrown aside was exactly what she wanted ₫° "No," I insisted. "No gentleman in his right mind could do such a **á**' "Well, as to whether old Flip is in his right mind or not, that's a subject for debate," he mused. "But regardless, I tell you, he will not marry your sister. Didn't you see him lose interest in the last girl he bombarded with flowers before he decided to garget her?" æ My mind flashed back a few weeks. Oh dear Lord! Could it be...? đ¹ "Well... yes." ਕੰ "So he was interested in another girl shortly before?" ਕੱ "Um... two, in fact." ď "Even better. Who was the unfortunate pair?" 34 "My other two sisters." **5**46 "Your family's house must be full to the attic with tulips." 298 a "It is." đ "Are they beautiful?" đ° "The tulips?" 44 "No! Your other two sisters, Miss Linton." 222 "Oh." I pondered this for a moment, conjuring up an image of Anne and Maria's faces. Finally, I reluctantly admitted: "I suppose so." **4**5 "With long blonde hair?" ₫⁵ "Yes. đ "And shining blue eyes?" He fluttered his eyelashes in a way a man a™ should not be able to. I just barely managed to stifle a laugh. 'Um... yes. Both of them.' đ "No wonder poor old Flip was carried away. How long did it take for him to forget they existed?" **48** "Err... I think about a week ਬੰ "You see?" ď He rubbed his hands again, as if everything were resolved. **4**8 I did indeed begin to see. A part of me did, at least. That part wanted to burst out laughing and hug this strange stranger who had so simply dispelled the doom that had been hovering over me and my sister for weeks. But another part of me still couldn't believe Carefully, I sni ed the air. There was no smell of alcohol. Could it be that Captain Carter really was not drunk? That he was telling the I suddenly remembered Patsy telling me how Wilkins had been pursuing her, even before Anne and Maria. Patsy had blonde hair even though it was tied in a knot, and her eyes were definitely bright - bright as a blow lamp about to explode. Could it be true? Maybe... á But of what use was it to me? I realized with a sinking feeling that even if Sir Philip didn't mean anything by his attentions, Ella was still very much in danger of losing her honor. My eyes strayed to Edmund for a moment who was glaring at the dancing couple with an intensity that could probably have incinerated the floor, had it been made of wood. ď When my eyes went back to Captain Carter, I saw him studying me critically. "You still don't believe me," he accused me. å "No, no, it's not that... I..." My voice trailed o . How on earth was I supposed to explain things to him? To a complete stranger? Should I even try? Was it right for me to disclose secrets I wasn't even supposed to know myself? 'What?" he asked, and the gentleness in his voice surprised me. "Miss Linton, I have no wish to cause pain to you or your sister. If there is ð٩١ "My sister," I said, hurriedly, before I could think better of it. "She doesn't want to marry Sir Philip." ਬੰ "Well, where's the problem in that?" He raised an eyebrow. "Why doesn't she just send him packing?" ď "Because," I said, feeling angry that I had to explain my sister's motives to this stranger, "she feels it would be her duty to accept him, since our aunt wishes it." a* He blinked, speechless for the moment. But the moment didn't last very long. á "That's silly!" ang ang "No, it isn't!" I snapped, though privately, I couldn't agree more. **a** "Oh? So you would do the same?" he asked, a mischievous grin tugging at the corner of his mouth - a place where there o en seemed to be one. A61 I flushed. #7 "Well... not exactly." "I didn't think so." The grin grew some more. "But to be honest, I still don't see the problem. I told you, Flip won't propose to your sister. In a week or two, he'll spot another beautiful fair head, and all will be joy and jubilation." Looking around to see if anybody was listening, I took a step closer. a "I... I'm afraid in a week it might be too late." "Too late?" The grin on his face didn't waver. "What do you mean, too đ "I mean that my sister might do something rash." ਕੰ "Something more rash than agreeing to marry a man whom she car ਕੰ a "Oh, I see, That's rash, indeed," arg He didn't sound nearly serious enough for my liking. I glared at him, and he grinned back, not perturbed in the least. **405** "You can't persuade her to... you know, maybe not be rash?" he inauired. å⁵ ਕੰ "But as I told you, it's just a matter of time. Trust me, when Flip come across the next lovely lady with big blue eyes, he'll forget all about vour sister.' ď And what good will that do, if Ella runs away with Edmund tomorrow night? Blast, blast, blast! "If it takes a week for him to find one," I just said, "that will be too late. đ "Hmm." Thoughtfully, he stroked his jaunty little triangle of beard. "Well, that leaves only one option, then. We'll just have to pick one out for him – immediately. ᅪ I stared at him as if he'd spoken Chinese. 852 a "What do you mean, 'pick one out'?" I demanded. **జ్** "Well," he said with a renewed grin and a sweeping gesture that took in the whole ballroom with all the dancing, chatting guests, "There are a lot of ladies available here - a great many of them with blue eyes, I'd wager. We can pick one, and shove her into his way. With luck, he'll fall in love with her on the spot and leave your sister alone. If it doesn't work, we can always try with another." ă² It took me a few seconds to think of something to say. a "Captain... are you quite sure you're not intoxicated?" 193 "Quite. If I were drunk, I would be seeing two of you, but there is only one." He bowed, just as snappy as before. "And what a lovely one it Heat rushed up into my cheeks. "You're trying to make me compliments when a few minutes ago you accused me of wanting to murder someone?' He winked. "Who knows, that might have been a compliment, too. For all you know I'm the most abominable villain and murder people in their beds every night." "I wouldn't be surprised," I said drily. And he actually had the gall to å⁵ "You have to be drunk!" I pronounced. "Nobody could talk this much He gave a sad little sigh, "I always talk like this, My aunt tried to teach me manners, but it never worked. It's why I went into the army. In the army, you don't have to say anything, just do what you're told, so nobody has noticed what a colossal scoundrel I am yet. I have hopes of keeping it up for another two or three years before I'm found out." "Will you stop gibbering and listen?" ď, "Yes, Miss. Certainly, Miss." å Look here, you can't be right. You simply can't be. It's not possible that anybody could forget my sister as easily as you say! Nobody could be that empty-headed." đ′ "You've never looked into one of Flip's ears, Miss Linton. I swear, you can see the light from the other side." 33K "You promised to keep your mouth shut!" đ٩ "Oh. Yes indeed, I did. Sorry. I tried my best." 606 "All you told me," I said, shaking my head, "is well and good, but it doesn't change the facts. Even if he hasn't wanted to marry any of the other girls before, he does want to marry Ella. He told my aunt so." Captain Carter's eyebrows went up so high they almost vanished into his curly brown locks. å⁷ "Really? What exactly did he say?" ď "Something about needing his own little sunshine in his home..." đ I broke o, because he had started laughing. He was almost bent double and people were starting to stare. A14 "Captain Carter!" I hissed. ₫° "I- I'm sorry," he chortled. "It's just... his own little sunshine... that's so... you know..." Slowly, he brought himself under control again but there was still a broad grin on his face. "He told me about that too, you know, that he wanted sunshine in his home." **2**67 "You see? I told you he wants t-" á "He'll build the place on the south side of his manor house, I think. Where the sunshine is most abundant. Though he might have problems, since the ground drops o rather suddenly there." **586** I blinked. "W-what?" đ "He's planning to build a winter garden," Captain Carter told me gently. "He's always been heartbroken that all his lovely flowers die during the winter, and, well, he's just hit on this idea..." **51**3 "A... winter... garden...?" đ٩ "Yes. You know, one of this places with big windows where plants can grow all year round? They are very much the fashion at the moment. People are building them as house-extensions all over London, and even begin to decorate them with tables and chairs and have their tea parties there, I've been told. Though personally, I prefer to take my tea beside a crackling fire in the har-384 a "Shut up!" **4**63 "Yes, Miss. Of course, Miss." 숍 "I'm going to kill him." Slowly, I turned towards Sir Philip, who was still whirling across the dance floor, my sister in his arms, a ridiculous grin on his ridiculous face. "I'm going to drag him into a dark alley and strangle him to death!" 235 ars "I thought I had convinced you not to do that?" **å**⁵ "I've changed my mind. I'm not even going to bother with an alley! I'm going to murder him, right here, right now." å Captain Carter cleared his throat. "I'm not sure that is such a good idea " đ⁵ I whirled on him, for the moment forgetting about Sir blasted Phillip. "Have you any idea what heartache this man put my sister through? What kind of tragedy he almost caused? đ١ "Yes, but I'm sure he didn't mean any of it." **å** "And that's supposed to make it better?" ď "No. It just means that maybe he doesn't deserve to be strangled." æ "We'll see about that!" đ I turned again and started towards the dance floor, but immediately my way was blocked by a wall of black velvet with glittering gold Captain Carter was. Now I did. ars "Get out of my way," I growled. **3**3 "Miss Linton," he said so ly. "Has it occurred to you that if you kill somebody in the middle of a crowded ballroom, you might be thrown into prison?" "I don't care!' ď He studied my face. "Yes, you probably don't, at the moment. But what about your sister? I'm sure she would.' **a**⁰ I hesitated. He was right. Besides... I had never actually killed anybody before. I might not get it right the first time. *37*3 "May I suggest an alternative solution?" he said. ď "You don't mean that silly plan of yours to just select a random blonde and throw him in his way?' **å** "It's not silly." å* "It is!" ď "It's not. And I'll just have to prove it to you – if only to keep you out of prison. 44 Grabbing my hand, he started pulling me towards one of the raised niches that overlooked the ballroom on the opposite side of the room from the large windows. "What are you doing?" I exclaimed, as he pulled me through a throng of noble ladies, who gazed a er us with interest. It was not common for a man to hold a lady's hand at a ball, still less to pull her through the crowd. 267 "Helping you," was his cheerful answer. "We need to take up a position from where we can inspect our possible recruits. Then we can discuss candidates and pick the unlucky lady whose fate it will be to save your sister's life, love and honour." æã Before I could free myself, he had pulled me up the steps into the raised niche he had been heading towards. We could see over the heads of the guests and had a good view of the entire ballroom. "Now do you see any likely blue-eyed lady?" he prompted, sweeping his arm across the crowd. **3**° Was he honestly asking me to look for someone I thought could replace my sister? 43 "No," I growled, crossing my arms in front of my chest. I wasn't going to play this ridiculous game! 102 Even though it might be funasked a little voice in the back of my head. I ignored it. 47 "Not one, Miss Linton?" ਕੈ "Well..." His smile was so coaxing, so charming... Reluctantly I pointed to one random lady. "There's one over there." af4 "No," he decided. "She has brown hair. Didn't I tell you Flip likes to fall in love with blondes? Don't ask me why he does it, I find brunettes much more interesting." He winked at me! He actually had the nerve to wink at me! "But for Flip, the ladies have to be blonde." "Any other requirements?" I asked, as sourly as possible. But I was hard pressed to keep a grin o my face. "Should she have a tiny waist? Or two noses, perhaps?" æ۱ "Well, one that isn't over eighty would probably have a greater chance of engaging his a ections." ar6 Against my will, my lips twitched. ď "What about her?" He pointed to another young lady. a "She has a face like a horse." **æ** "So does Flip. They should suit each other admirably." "In case you hadn't noticed, Captain Carter, ugly men are no less fond of pretty girls than others." å2 "True," he sighed. "What a shallow sex we are. Now... what about a€ĸ "She looks nice enough, there is only one problem." á ਕੰ "The ring on her finger. She's married." á° Captain Carter waved a hand, dismissively. "We don't need to tell Flip that. He's short-sighted, he probably wouldn't notice." "Captain!" **a**6 "Besides, we don't need her for long. We would only borrow her for one night. I'm sure she wouldn't mind." I hadn't thought there existed a man in England who could shock me. Lhad been wrong. "Her husband might," I pointed out, drily. d3 The Captain nodded, earnestly. "I bow to your superior knowledge of men, Miss Linton. So... on to the next one. 299 "What about her?" I said, feeling a silly grin appear on my face. "The "I don't think so. She looks rather like a fat woodpecker." 830 a "Hmm... maybe. And the one on her le?" a "She would be perfect," Captain Carter admitted. "Only, Flip already fell in love with her two months ago, and I'm not quite sure he has A13 "You talk about falling in love as other people would about a visit to đ⁵ "Not quite. Flip has his hair cut about once every fortnight, but he usually manages to fall in and out of love once a week.' ä¹ "Um... maybe the most intelligent approach would be then to first exclude all the ladies he has already fallen in love with once?" á "You're quite right!" His face lit up. "How clever of you, I would never have thought of that. Well let me think... there's Miss Alden, Miss Cokes, Miss Howard, Lady Darwin, Lady Caroline..." 316 "Lady Caroline?! She's at least seventy years old!" **³**³ "Yes, he fell in love with the back of her head and changed his mind **a**K I squinted at him suspiciously. đ "Are you making half of this up?" d' "What do you think of me, Miss Linton," he said with grave propriety. "That I would joke when such serious matters are at stake?" **≈**33 đ⁵ "Marvellous. You already know me so well." Whipping out my fan, I gave him a sharp jab into the ribs. He flinched in a very gratifying way. ä'n "Be serious, Captain! My sister's welfare is at stake here!" a³ Rubbing his ribs, he gave me a smile. His smile was quite charming, particularly with that perky little spot of beard at the bottom of his strong face, that made him look like a trickster out of some old northern legend. <u>621</u> "For you, I shall do my best to be serious, Miss Linton. Though I can't "Very well." Content, I turned to the crowd again and pointed with my ď ď "Flip! There you are, my dear fellow!" ď At the sound of Captain Carter's voice, Sir Philip turned around. 'Carter!" He exclaimed. "I've been looking for you, to..." ď His voice trailed \boldsymbol{o} , as he saw who was standing beside Captain 235 Carter. The Captain nodded to the rather confused looking blonde lady who was standing beside him. "Philip, may I introduce you to Lady Katharine Rowntree? Lady Katharine? This is the man I said you simply had to meet, Sir Philip Wilkins." A97 "But you said you wanted to show me a painting from Lady Metcalfs collec—" the young lady began. "Anyway," Captain Carter said hurriedly, and loudly. "Now we're are all introduced. Isn't that wonderful? "Wonderful is hardly the word for it," Sir Philip breathed. He had an expression on his face I had seen only once before – when he had first beheld Ella at Lady Metcalf's last ball. "Perfect would be more appropriate. Lady Katherine, would you do me the honour of the next 2ªK "Oh... why, certainly, Sir Philip," she said, blinking in astonishment. "But... don't you already have a partner? Your companion..." her eyes wandered to the place where Ella was standing. Ella opened her mouth reflexively. đ I was beside her in a flash, grasping her arm in iron grip. á "She doesn't mind at all. I think she's a bit tired." 172 "Oh. Well, if that's the case..." a Sir Philip's eyes hadn't le Lady Katherine. He extended his arm, and ₫³ Ella watched as the two of them departed. đ "W-what was that?" she asked. ਬੰ "Can't you tell? A miracle, of course." Across the ballroom I could see Edmund. He was staring gloomily out of the window again. "And," added, "We might just have time for another, tonight, Look over there." 523 " Edmund's voice was hoarse. I could tell, because I was hiding behind a potted plant nearby. I was curious, all right? I had worried myself to death over this a air of Ella's. The least I wanted in exchange was to see the happy end! an The young piano-tuner's son looked around the ballroom. "I don't Ella took a step forward. Her eyes were glued to the young man ਬੰ "No " ď "So is it done, then?" he asked, bitterly, "Are you his now? He has å⁵ Another step forward. á' å Edmund's eyes flew open. Then, his jaw muscles twitched. "But he ď Another step. They were standing in front of each other now. I thanked God that they were in a quiet corner of the room, with nobody paying attention to them. The way they were looking at each other made things all too clear for anyone who cared to look. đ "No." Ella whispered. ď "What do you mean, no?" His voice was just a whisper too desperation, pain, with a tinge of hope. å "It appears Sir Philip has lost interest in me. I... I cannot rightly understand it, but he was introduced to another young lady, and from one moment to the next seemed to forget I exist." **2**4 The spark of hope in Edmund exploded into a fiery blaze. I could see á "He is a fool," he said in a quiet voice. å It was he who took the next step forward. They were standing almost close enough to kiss now. But they wouldn't, here in the ballroom, would they? đ Would they? ď To keep myself from screaming a warning to the two lovelorn fools I bit down on the sleeve of my dress. ars "So, Miss Linton, it appears that you are still free." Edmund's voice was casual, but his eyes weren't leaving hers for a moment. **469** "It appears so, Mr Conway." Her eyes seemed fixed on his by the same unbreakable force. ap2 "And will remain so? Or will Sir Philip appear at your door tomorrow morning, begging forgiveness?" a "Do not ask me how... but I know in my heart that he is gone. He will trouble me no more." ã° Edmund took a deep breath. a "And don't you regret his leaving? Haven't all the flowers that he sent you conquered your heart?' đ٩ "If he were to send me a million red roses it would not gain him my I nodded, approvingly. My sister might have very strange ideas about love, life and honour, but at least she wasn't mercenary. Never that. a "And his noble titles, his lands?" Edmund inquired. "Are you not sorry to lose such grand prospects?" aግ "Were he the king of England and o ered me all the riches of the Empire, I would not be swayed.' **891** Ouite right! Oh, that's female rectitude for you! å "So you are truly still free," Edmund breathed ď "I am," she said, then, lowering her voice so only he – and I, behind the nearby potted plant – could hear: "But my heart is not. It was given to another long ago.' Love, adoration, yearning, relief: A Symphony of emotions played on Edmund's face – or maybe it was a Sonata, considering he was a piano tuner's son. 269 "Then," he said, his voice trembling in vibrato full of feeling, "since you are still free, may I request the honour of your hand for the next **₽**² She dipped her head in the most chaste curtsy I had ever seen. "You may, Mr Conway. I shall await you on the dance floor." **3**34 And with that, she glided away ď May I say that up to this moment I had never looked forward to a dance as I did to this one? Which says something about my attitude to dancing, considering I wasn't even going to be involved in the actual exercise. ð⁵ When finally, one song ended and the musicians struck up the tune of the next dance, I stuck a bit more of my dress into my mouth, just to be sure I wouldn't make any noise and alert them to my secret hiding å There he was! Edmund was approaching Ella while in the background, the notes of a slow waltz sounded. The most romantic of all couple dances – I couldn't have planned it better myself. ď He stopped and front of her, and bowed. ਕੌ "Miss Ella?" ₫ She curtsied. a 526 He extended his arm. She took it, her face composed, but her eyes $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ shining with an inner light. I didn't fail to notice that instead of placing her hand against his so his fingers touched the back of her hand, as was custom for reasons of propriety, she slid her hand into his so that his fingers could surround all of her little hand and touch her palm. When her hand was in his, I could see a small shiver going through her body. It was as if she had finally come home. He led her onto the dance floor to a place between the other couples. $Most\ of\ them\ stood\ there,\ awkward,\ fidgeting,\ not\ knowing\ where\ to$

look. Edmund and Ella knew exactly where to look, and it wasn't at their feet. They stared at each other's faces as if beholding an angel from heaven. I had slight worries that they might trip during the first $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) +\left(1\right) \left(1\right) \left(1\right) +\left(1\right) \left(1\right)$ turn, considering how they couldn't take their eyes o each other-

As the music began in earnest, they seemed to sink into each other's arms. Their movements were perfectly synchronized, fluid, and graceful. I stared in awe. This I had not expected. All right, Ella was not as bad a dancer as I – She was far too timid to step on any gentleman's feet. But I doubted the piano tuner's son had had much experience with waltzing, and there they were, waltzing away as if

Suddenly, I remembered that when dancing with Mr Ambrose, I hadn't stepped on his feet either, though I had been sorely tempted to. Why did I remember this now? I couldn't imagine that I was...

I jumped about a mile high. Captain Carter had appeared next to me out of nowhere. It was an astonishing feat for a man wearing a waistcoat with glinting golden tigers on it that were visible from a

He looked back at me, a quizzical expression on his face. "They are conducting a secret liaison in the middle of a ballroom full of

"Not the brightest pair of candles in the shop, are they?" "Oh, shut up! That's my sister you're talking about!"

He bowed his head. "Yes, Miss Linton. As you wish, Miss Linton."

"I must," he said, nodding gravely. "To help a lady get rid of a prospective husband – now that is no particularly honourable deed But to help a lady save her sister's honour and happiness? Now that's something entirely dierent. Something I might confidently brag of

My eyes shot up to his. "Don't you dare! If you breathe a word of any

"...You will hamstring me and subject me to the most terrible tortures you can devise," he finished my sentence, cheerfully. "Don't worry. I know when to keep my mouth shut. It's only when it's already open

He put a hand on his heart. "I swear on the honour of my regiment," he said. "Except for me, its members actually have some."

"That's better." He smiled back at me. "This is an hour for joy and

And he was right - it was. Ella was saved, or to be more precise, she had never been in danger. Later I might rampage a little about the $\,$ fact that all my worry and scheming had been for nothing. But for now, simple joy filled every part of me, and I was happy and secure in the knowledge that Ella would stay happy, her honour intact and her

Captain Carter stepped closer and opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something – but just at that moment, a man in the uniform of a Colonel waved him over. "Carter! Come over here, I've got to tell you something. I just got a memorandum about the Sinai-situation." The Captain gave me an apologetic smile. "I fear I have to depart, Miss Linton. Work calls me even in my leisure hours."

"That's all right," I assured him. "You've already given me enough of

"It was my pleasure." He winked at me. "If ever you should feel the inclination to go searching for a romantic interest again, I hope you'll

Before his words had fully registered, he was already gone.

"There you are, Lilly!" My aunt and Maria appeared next to me, waking me from my stupor. "Where have you been?"

Doing my best to prevent the marriage that is your heart's desire. "I... I've been dancing," I fibbed. "Yes, that's what I've been doing.

"Really?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I didn't see you on the

"Um..." Quickly, I looked around for a suitable candidate. My eyes fell

"You have been dancing with him?" Maria said, "You are joking, aren't

dance-floor. Whom were you dancing with?"

muscular figure with his long Mahogany locks.

introducing us to your friend, surely.

behind the poor little fox.

"Captain?'

"Yes, Miss Linton?"

"What can I do for you?"

floor.'

on a tigered waistcoat. "That gentleman, over there."

"No," I said, desperately hoping they would believe me.

"Well, if that's so," Maria said, "you won't have anything against

"What a brilliant idea, my dear," my aunt exclaimed. "Lilly, go on,

By now, Captain Carter seemed to have finished his talk with his military friend. I had no other choice, though I would rather not have approached him, particularly a er what he said to me last.

I approached, my aunt and sister behind me like a pack of hounds

'Captain Carter, may I introduce you to my aunt, Mrs Brank, and my sister, Miss Maria Linton," I said, pointing them out in turn as they curtsied. "Aunt, Maria, may I present Captain William Carter of the

"Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said my aunt with another

"No, it is I who am delighted to make your acquaintance," the Captain said, bowing with the same snappy precision he had shown before.

"I was just telling them how we had danced together for three dances

"Indeed, and what marvellous dances they were," he said. Thank God, he was quick on the uptake. "I can hardly find the words to express my admiration of your charming niece's skill on the dance

I threw him a thankful smile. My aunt smiled, too. Maria didn't.

"That's wonderful to hear," my aunt trilled. Again, she let her eyes roam over the captain. "That is an interesting waistcoat you're wearing, Captain, Don't most o icers prefer to wear uniforms?" "Most do," he said, nodding gravely. "But I had this specially made. I commissioned a French dressmaker to embroider it with one tiger for

"Is that so?" My aunt's eyes widened in awe, and so did Maria's. "You actually killed so many of these fearful beasts? Captain, you must be

I ducked behind the nearest potted plant. If anybody noticed the snort of laughter that issued from behind it soon a erwards, they

It wasn't long before I emerged again, my face perfectly straight. Captain Carter was regaling the wide eyed-Maria with tales of his tiger-hunts. My aunt was still present, too, but she wasn't really listening. I recognized the look in her eyes immediately - a look

of England. She was sizing him up as a potential suitor, a task that

"...and then," he was saying, "the tiger sprang at me, and I grabbed for

"Yes. Just in time I managed to turn it around and let it come down with the blunt end on the tiger's head. I hit it with such force that the

Behind her back, I imitated her gesture, and Captain Carter's lip

He was by no means the first gentleman I had heard telling fake tales of bravery and adventure. But he was the first one that let me in on the game. And somehow, because of that, I didn't mind. I exchanged

"Ah," he said, smiling back and nodding. "There you are, Miss Linton." 者 "Were you so desperate for my company?" I asked, arching an

"Indeed I was. Did I not tell you before how much I enjoyed our dancing? I fear those three dances you have shared with me so far have only le me starving and craving for more. In fact, I can hardly remember them anymore. May I beg you to favour me with another?" 36K

He extended his arm to me, his eyes sparkling with evil mirth.

"If you try very hard," I said, "I'm sure you'll remember the three

"Indeed, no," he said, sighing regretfully. "It already seems to me omehow as if they never happened. Which would be such a pity,

I took his arm, forcing a smile on my face. On our way to the dance floor, as the first notes floated through the air, I leaned towards him

I didn't step on his feet, he didn't step on mine. He was a considerate dancer, and didn't try to steer me across the ballroom like most other gentleman. Neither was he like Mr Ambrose, with every movement perfect and sleek. Instead, he was flamboyant, every note of the music expressing itself in the way he moved, he smiled, he held me. Maybe he held me a little bit closer than other gentleman usually did. 32% When he let me go, a crowd of his military friends came and started

"I'm afraid I will have to leave you, Miss Linton. I hope that I will be able to have the pleasure of dancing again with you soon. Four times

I couldn't suppress a tiny smile. It hadn't really been that bad...

I was rewarded with a cheeky smile. "I shall look forward to it."

"Well, maybe," I murmured, "If you promise to behave yourself, I'll

"I said maybe" I called a er him as he strode o with his friends. But he didn't turn around again. He just walked away, a spring in his step. H^2 Shaking my head, I turned away. How likely was it that we would ever meet or dance again? A er all, now that his friend had dropped Ella $\,$ like an Irish peasant would a hot potato, Sir Philip would likely cut o all acquaintance with us. It would simply be too awkward to spend $time\ in\ his\ company.\ Surely,\ most\ of\ his\ friends\ would\ follow\ his$ example and shun us. I wasn't likely to see Captain Carter again. Well, good riddance. The less men there were in my life, the better. Even if they do happen to be quite nice, in a crazy way.

I turned once more to watch Ella. It was clear that she didn't feel the same as I. She lay in Edmund's arms as though there was no place on earth she would rather be. The smile on her face could only be described as radiant. It was shining brighter than any of the chandeliers that hung from the ceiling and illuminated the ballroom. Sighing contentedly, I retreated to a quiet corner of the ballroom from where I could watch them quietly. It was joy to see Ella's joy, a balm for my soul that had been tortured for her sake over the last few weeks. How wonderful and simple the world suddenly seemed. All door for instance, but as regards a airs at home, things were looking

up, and I was feeling pretty chu ed as a result.

could go wrong anymore. Absolutely nothing.

And then I heard hisvoice behind me.

kind enough to accept my invitation.

fortunate that I always seem to get what I want."

the other fans' tweets if you come across any!:)

tweets for other readers to share and admire! :-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

Thank you for your awesome support! We're going to win this!

*Victorian crowds cheering loudly in the background**

Our competition is already busily using this new method, so we've got just a few days le to catch up to them!

So I challenge you, my dear readers: get creative! Tweet & retweet like the devil, and if you've got some extra free time available, please come up with some interesting, imagery artwork to post next to your spi ing tweets - because tweets that have pictures are more than two times as likely to get retweeted by people than other tweets! The Storm & Silence fan account on Twitter shall retweet & share the best and most beautiful of your

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Lord Daniel Eugene Dalgliesh.

Everything had worked out to perfection. Ella was happy, I was happy, and even Edmund was, though this wasn't exactly on my list $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) \left$ perceived dangers and di iculties I had foreseen for the near future had dissolved into nothing to night. I was sure that to night, nothing $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) =\left($

A voice that sounded very familiar, although I had heard it only twice before... A cultured, voice. A voice of knowledge, power, and maybe.

"Ah, Miss Linton. I was wondering if you would be of the party when I saw Sir Phillip's name on the guest list. How marvellous...

And I remembered Lady Metcalf telling us as we arrived: 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

Slowly, I turned, and was met by the penetrating, steel-blue gaze of

"I have been wanting to meet you again," he said, and smiled. "How

Attention, all my fiery ifrits! I have found a fabulously loopy loophole in the rules and regulations of this year's Wattys: apparently, this year's contest is not like an election where everyone gets just one vote and that's it. In the Wattys, anyone can vote AS OFTEN AS YOU LIKE by posting multiple tweets, as long as all of those tweets have all the following features: the title of the book, "Storm and Silence", as well as the tags #MyWattysChoice and @StormNSilence. Any Retweets of such tweets also seem to count as votes, so by all means retweet all

The smile drained from my face.

wouldn't it?"

He smiled.

It wasn't terrible.

"Well, Miss Linton?"

dances we danced together perfectly.

He extended his arm a little further.

"Will you wait till a er the dance?"

and said: "I'm going to murder you, Captain."

talking about this place called Sinai again.

it has been now, and yet it seems only one.

dance with you again someday.

He bowed to me, an apologetic look on his face.

consumed all her attention for the moment.

beast was knocked clean unconscious."

Maria clapped her hand in front of her mouth.

"And did you shoot it?" Maria demanded, breathless.

"So am I." Did Maria's voice actually sound breathy?

in a row" I said, hoping he would understand.

every one I killed while on Safari."

a man of tremendous courage!"

didn't connect it with me

my rifle.'

"No!"

twitched.

a smile with him.

"No. It was jammed."

He turned, and seemed surprised to find it was me.

"Where? Who do you...?" My aunt trailed o as she beheld the

"And... thank you." I looked down, but not quick enough to miss how

"Now I see what you meant when you said there might be complications if your sister were faced by a marriage to Flip," he said, smirking. The dance had just ended, but Edmund and Ella hadn't moved away from each other. They were still standing there, locked the other's gaze. "Do you think if we go over there you could introduce me to the complications? He looks like a nice young man." 374 "Certainly not," I hissed, grabbing him by the arm, as he was already starting forward. "It's supposed to be secret! Nobody must know

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but somehow, they managed not to.

they wanted to win a dancing competition.

It couldn't just be their infatuation, could it?

"They make quite a couple, don't they?

mile away.

people?"

"Well, um... yes."

he raised one of his eyebrows.

"You mean for helping you."

I moaned. "Yes, if you must put it like that."

when I next drink with my comrades."

that the wrong things come popping out of it."

I eyed him, the doubt obvious on my face.

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

celebration. Miss Linton."

future once more in her own hands.

your time. Thanks again for your help."

Dancing all the time."

"Thank me? For what?"

"For helping Ella."

79. A Waist of Tigers

Behind me, or rather in front of me now that I was facing him, stood a

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35

I whirled around, my heart pounding.

"What? Who said that?