

50. Threats and Decisions

Any feathers available to knock me over with? For the second time this night, I was completely taken by surprise. This tradesman's boy was turning out to be a regular Casanova! Had I heard right?	265
"W-what?" Ella stuttered. "What do you mean, challenge him?"	266
Apparently, she hadn't yet understood what he meant. Or she would not let herself understand, maybe.	267
"I mean, challenge him to a duel," Edmund replied, calmly. "To the death."	256
She took an involuntary step towards him. Or maybe it was voluntary. You could never tell with these love-struck people	266
"Edmund, you must not jest about such things," she whispered, her hands clasping the iron poles of the fence tightly. "You must not."	267
"Who says that I am jesting?"	267
"Please, Edmund, stop. You worry me sick."	268
"I am sorry for that. But it cannot be helped. You say you will not refuse Sir Philip, nor stand up to your aunt, so I have no choice."	259
"No choice but to contemplate violence?" Letting go of the poles, she threw her hands up in the air. "What mad demon possesses you, Edmund? I beg you, relinquish this mad scheme!"	276
"It is not mad. Indeed it is highly logical. You will not rid yourself of Sir Philip, very well, then I shall do it for you. I shall acquire a pistol, go to his house, and challenge him. Do you think I should explain the situation to him? How things stand between us?"	299
Ella almost fainted right then and there. Only Edmund's quick hands, which shot through the gaps in the fence and caught her around the waist, prevented her from falling.	297
Wait just a minute!	298
I was on the point of charging in. Now he definitely was touching areas he wasn't supposed to be touching on a lady, and I had to look after my little sister, after all. But then, he had only prevented her from falling. I decided to not kill him for his insolence just this once.	262
"Tell him?" Ella whispered, obviously in no hurry to get out of his arms. "Are you mad?"	269
He smiled at her. It was a boyish, excited kind of smile that looked new on his face which I had seen so often anxious and sad, yet it suited him well. He looked like a different person, and for the first time I began to understand what Ella saw in him, just a little.	267
"That's the second time you've accused me of insanity tonight, my love. Don't let it become a habit."	266
"Be serious, Edmund!"	267
"I'm absolutely serious. I don't want you to suspect me of a mental disorder."	264
"You know what I mean."	262
"Yes, I do. And I'm serious about that too."	262
"But telling Sir Philip? After all the hundreds and hundreds of times I have begged you to keep our love a secret?"	265
Edmund's smile became a trifle wistful.	269
"Ah, but what is there to keep secret anymore? If I go to him tomorrow and vanquish him, then it will not matter whether or not I have told him, will it? I need to explain it to him, Ella. I cannot simply march up to him and insult him to make him fight me. I would smudge the honour of my family, which, as you so diligently pointed out, is a bad thing to do. No, I need to go to him and say: 'Sir Philip, I love the girl you have set your sight on, and she loves me. I will fight for her with my last breath.' He is a gentleman. He will understand, and allow me the opportunity to fight for you. Once I have put a bullet through his heart, the way will once again be free. So you see, Ella, I am not mad. I have thought this through very carefully."	288
I nodded approvingly. For once, it seemed, somebody had been using their brains instead of their heart. The plan was indeed highly logical – except for one point. With unusual quickness, Ella realized it too.	276
"And what," she whispered, trembling in Edmund's arms, "if it is he who kills you?"	268
There were a few moments of silence. Well, almost-silence, anyway. In the distance, a dog barked with total disregard for the romantic drama unfolding in front of me.	265
"I wouldn't worry about that, love," he said, dismissively.	270
"Not worry?" She exclaimed, and suddenly it weren't just his arms around her – she was clasping him, now, too. That was more like it! Finally, she was taking some action of her own.	262
"Edmund, he is a gentleman! You're a tradesman's son. He's been raised to shoot with guns, hunts every year, and knows what he's doing. Have you ever handled a pistol before in your life?"	265
"I'm a quick learner."	268
"Edmund, tell me! Have you ever handled a pistol?"	266
"Not actually, no," he admitted. "But I've seen other people do it," he added as an afterthought.	276
The groan that originated from Ella indicated that she thought about as much of this excuse as I did.	270
"Edmund, please don't, I'm begging you!"	268
He shook his head.	268
"I would give you almost anything you want, love, but in this, I must deny you."	263
"But why?" reaching up, she clutched his shirt and, through a gap in the fence, buried her face in his chest. "Do you want to die? Are you truly mad?"	259
Encircling her with his arms, he drew her even closer towards himself. I was debating again whether or not to intervene – but somehow I couldn't bring myself to interrupt them. And there was still an iron fence between them, so things couldn't really get very intimate. "I have no wish to die, Ella."	272
"Then why? Tell me, for heaven's sake!"	271
"Don't you see?" Pushing her away a bit, he raised her chin and forced her to look into his face. "I have to free you. I have to believe that you and I can be together. If that cannot be, life would not be worth living anymore. Not for me, anyway."	274
Atta boy! I had to admit, part of me really liked this plan. If it worked, Ella would be rid of Sir Philip. If it didn't, she'd be rid of this silly fellow. A win-win situation.	276
"Isn't it enough to know I love you?" She asked, her voice thick. "To know that I will never, ever love anybody else, no matter what I will be forced to do?"	267
He shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm not that noble, my dear. I need to feel your love, to feel you in my arms, safe and warm. I need to know that you can say to me 'I love you' without blushing in shame. I need to know that I am yours and you are mine, now and forever."	266
"That can never be!"	268
"It must and it shall be."	262
Slowly, he began to untangle himself from her and from the fence. The latter took longer than one might have thought. In order to passionately embrace her, he'd had to squeeze his arms through some pretty tight spots. Apparently, he still hadn't thought of using the ladder that still rested peacefully against the Conway's garden shed.	273
"What are you doing?" Ella cried, as he slipped from her grasp.	272
"Going," he returned. "The time for talk is passed. Now it is time for action." His face took on a grim expression. "I am going to have to be fit and alert tomorrow. I had better call it a night."	261
"Edmund, you don't... you don't seriously mean you'll go through with this?"	274
"I have never been more serious about anything in my life. Except maybe once – when I first told you I loved you. And what I shall now do is practically the same – the only difference is, that I shall translate the words into deeds."	267
"Edmund, no!" She tried to stop him as he stepped away from the fence and turned, but he was too strong for her. He set out across the lawn, and I felt a lump in my throat. From the back, he looked nothing like the cheerful tradesman's son I had known him as throughout the time we had lived in this street. He looked like a tragic hero, going towards his final end.	253
"Please, Edmund! You can't go! You can't challenge Sir Philip. Please don't! Please!"	266
Halfway down the garden, he stopped, and turned his head to look back at her wistfully.	267
"I have to," was his only reply.	267
"But what if he kills you?" she wailed.	266
He smiled sadly.	280
"Then I will die in the knowledge that I have done everything in my power to keep us together. It will be a comforting knowledge when the darkness closes in."	288
Turning away again, he continued through the garden, towards his parent's house.	267
"Edmund, wait!" Ella reached through the fence, as if she could grab him and drag him back to her side. But there were yards of distance between them. "Edmund, please! Don't go!"	270
This time, he did not stop.	267
"Edmund, My love, I'm begging you!"	276
She sank to her knees. By now, the volume of her voice had risen considerably over the usual careful whisper she used for her secret rendezvous in the garden. I threw an anxious glance back at the house, but so far, nobody seemed to have heard.	270
"I'm begging you, please, come back! You can't do this, please!"	267
Still, he did not stop. If I'd had a rock of the right size to hand, I'd lobbed it at his silly receding head. Nobody made my sister cry like that! But simultaneously, another part of me wanted to hug him fiercely. He was willing to risk his own life to free my sister from a marriage she feared and despised. I couldn't help respecting anybody who was ready to do that, even if I did want to throw rocks at his head.	283
"Please, Edmund," Ella tried once more. "By your love for me, I beg you, stop! Don't go! Don't die!"	265
When this final attempt failed, she slumped to the ground and knelt there, weeping, her face hidden in her hands.	261
"All right!" she whimpered. "I accept! I will... I will do it."	288
Edmund, just about to reach the back door of his parent's house, froze in place.	264
"What?" he asked, without turning. His voice was barely audible.	264
"What did you say?"	272
"I... I said, I'll do it," repeated Ella, taking deep breaths, as though she had run miles and miles. "I accept your offer, Edmund Conway. For you, to save your life and give you happiness, I shall forsake my family. I will run away with you. May God forgive me."	288
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I sat behind the bush for quite some time. I suppose it had to be quite some time, because when I wandered back into the house, everybody was already asleep. Even Ella, up in our room, had stopped crying by now, though I could still see the moisture on her cheeks twinkle in the moonlight which streamed in through the window.	270
Only when I lay in my bed, the warm blankets over me, did I realize that if I didn't do something really quick, I would lose my little sister.	255
Suddenly, in spite of all the blankets, I felt cold inside.	271
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My Dear Lords and Ladies,	267
Recently, I have had a mob with pitchforks and torches outside of my manor lately, chanting "WE WANT AMBROSE! WE WANT AMBROSE!" ;-) So I just wanted to reassure you that Mr Ambrose has not been injured. Soon, Lilly will return to work and the sparks will start to fly. You have to take into account that at the moment, it's weekend in my story, so Mr Ambrose is far away at his own place.	260
BUT NOW HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS:	267
To not make the wait too agonizing for you, I'll be posting an additional chapter early to celebrate my return from my holidays. So the wait for Mr Ambrose's return will be halved!	288
I hope you are content with me, My dear Lords and Ladies?	264
Yours Truly	267
Sir Rob	271