

53. On Dates

Looking down at his papers again, Mr Ambrose gestured to a pile of files and a box beside him on the desk. "Deposit these in that box over there, will you?"

I gaped at him, speechless. It was five in the morning!

When, a er a few moments, he noticed that I still hadn't moved, he looked up again. Mr Ambrose would never go so far as to actually raise a questioning eyebrow, but he didn't need to.

"You are still standing, although I gave you an order. Any particular reason?"

"Do you... sleep here or what?" I demanded, indignantly.

He looked down again.

"Why so interested in my sleeping arrangements, Mr Linton? Were you thinking of joining me? If so, I must disappoint you. I do have a bed here, but it would not be wide enough."

Several things ran through mind at the moment which I could throw at him, none of which were fit for polite conversation, and all of which were likely to get me sacked on the spot. I swallowed my anger and hoped it wouldn't give me indigestion.

Instead I said: "I am three hours early Mr Ambrose."

He nodded.

"Yes, I noticed. Now stop dawdling and take care of those files. Return to me when you are done. Since you are here, I have something else for you to do."

I went and got the files, praying vehemently that the "something" he wanted me to do involved a sharp sword and the severing of his head from his body. In no time at all, I was back in front of his desk, and I still had not exploded or run to get sharp weapons. I was rather impressed with myself.

"The files are stored as ordered, Mr Ambrose, Sir," I said in as sweet a tone as I could manage.

"I see."

No "Well done" or "Thank you". He didn't even raise his head from his papers.

"Sir? What is it you wished me to do?"

"To wait until I have finished reading. Then I will give you instructions."

I closed my eyes and slowly counted to ten to calm myself. Unfortunately, it didn't work, so I continued. But when I reached fifty, I was still just as infuriated as I had been at one. Did he have to be so... cool? So distant?

51, 52, 53...

Well, he was Mr Ambrose, so he was naturally about as warm and welcoming as a freshly calved iceberg, but still. It aggravated me more now than it had before, having seen, in contrast, his infatuated behaviour towards that bloody female the other night at the ball.

64, 65, 66, 67...

And of course he had to have horrible taste in ladies! I wouldn't have minded if she had been a half-way decent creature, but this Hamilton person was a femme fatale, and would leech all the life and money he had out of him.

79, 80, 81...

I was incredulous that he couldn't see it, or that he couldn't find a better woman.

"Mr Linton?"

He should be able to find another. A er all, he was, I had to admit, abominably handsome. Very, very handsome...

97, 98, 99...

"Mr Linton? Mr Linton, I am talking to you!"

"What?" My eyes flew open and I blinked at Mr Ambrose, who was staring at me coolly over the top of his business papers.

"Mr Linton, I have called your name about five times now and you have been just standing there with your eyes closed. If you are not fully awake yet, I had rather you return home and waste your own time sleeping there than here. There is work to do."

I raised my chin and met his gaze unflinchingly.

"I am completely awake, Sir."

"Indeed? Then go and fetch a small leather-bound volume out of the part of the lowest drawer of your desk. And keep your eyes open while you are walking, will you? I would hate for you to walk against a wall by accident."

I managed a smile, though I doubt it was very polite.

"Thank you for the concern for my welfare, Sir."

He still had put his papers aside now, but still he hadn't looked up. Instead, he was methodically arranging them into several small piles.

"Who said anything about your welfare, Mr Linton? Stone walls are quite expensive, and I would not like to have to spend money on repairing any cracks."

I got out of there before I committed a justifiable murder, and I marched through my ice towards the desk. Of course he had been right, blast him. There was indeed a small, leather-bound book in the lowest drawer of the desk, right in the back le corner. I took it out and opened it out of curiosity.

"Bring it directly to me," his voice sounded from the other room.

"There's nothing in there that would interest you particularly, I can promise you."

I did not blush as easily as Ella, but my face might have just been a tiny bit red when I returned into Mr Ambrose's ice, the book in hand. Stopping in front of the large, dark wood desk, I held it out to Mr Ambrose. He waved me away.

"Keep it. It is your responsibility now."

"But... you didn't want me to look inside?"

"I didn't want you to waste time on idle curiosity. Remember: Knowledge is power is time is money."

"I would have gained knowledge if you had let me read it," I pointed out, my rebellious spirit flaring.

He considered this, the coldness in his eyes for a moment replaced by thoughtfulness. Then something sparked there. Surely I was mistaken, but for just a fraction of a second, it looked almost like... humour?

"True. You may take it home with you and study it in your leisure hours. I shall expect that you have fully familiarized yourself with it by tomorrow morning."

My mouth popped open in astonishment.

"What?!" I demanded.

He looked at me, not a trace of humour in his face anymore. "First you stand around with your eyes closed, now your ears don't seem to be working? I must say, I am quite disappointed in you, Mr Linton." I straightened.

"There is no call for that, I assure you, Sir! I shall have the book memorized by tomorrow, Sir! I don't think that anybody ever managed to make the word 'Sir' sound so much like 'slug'. Mr Ambrose, though, didn't seem to notice."

"Then we can proceed now. Go to the current week."

"W-what?"

"I am becoming tired of hearing that word, Mr Linton. Go to the current week, in the book you are holding. It is an appointment book. It holds my appointments over the year, which is divided into months, which again are divided into weeks. You do know what a week is, Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir. I do, Sir."

"How fortunate. Go to the current week."

Quickly, I flitted through the volume until I had found the appropriate page.

"It is your task to enter and keep track of all appointments. If I forget, it is your duty to remind me in time."

I looked up, raising an eyebrow.

"You forget appointments?"

"No. In fact I have never forgotten a single appointment in my life. However, better safe than sorry."

"Is that one of your principles, like the knowledge-power-money thing?"

"You could say so."

"Maybe I should start a list to keep track of all the wisdoms you impart to me."

"What you should keep track of, Mr Linton, are my appointments. Now, can we return to the matter at hand?"

"Yes, Sir! Of course, Sir!"

He started rattling o dates at an incredible rate, detailing when and where he was to go exactly. The list went from various factories to places at the harbour, several banks, business associations and meetings. Whatever his business interests were, exactly, they were many and varied. I did my best to take all the dates down in a legible manner, and did pretty well, I think, until he dropped the bomb.

"At three pm on Saturday, I shall be attending the opera."

I le a blot of ink on the page.

"What?"

He looked up at me with those cool, sea-blue eyes of his.

"There is that word again. Are you particularly fond of it, Mr Linton?"

"Don't change the subject," I accused him. "You attend the opera?"

"Yes."

"You do not consider such a frivolous activity to be a waste of your time and money?"

"No."

"And why not, if I may ask?"

"Because I own it."

"Oh."

"I like to keep the management on their toes. And the ballet dancers as well."

I blinked. Had he just made a joke? His face told me otherwise. It was as stony as ever. But nobody could be that serious, could they?

The opera...

Suddenly, a thought shot through my mind. A very annoying thought in a green ball gown.

"Will anybody be going with you?" I enquired, suspiciously.

Like Miss Hamilton, for instance? Or the writer of the pink letters? Or... both?

"Is that any business of yours, Mr Linton?"

"It is if you want me to procure tickets for you."

"I see."

He thought for a moment, tapping with his fingers on the desk, looking away from me, out of the window and over the city of London. I waited with bated breath.

"Yes," he said finally. "I think somebody will be going with me. Procure two tickets for the opera."

Somebody? Somebody? Was he torturing me on purpose? Did he know that I was dying to know? There wasn't the slightest indication of it on his face. But then, when was there ever any indication of anything on his face? He was as easily to see through as a brick wall, and just as friendly.

"Anybody in particular?" I asked, and immediately regretted it. A er all, he shouldn't be thinking I was... interest in him in any way, which I clearly was not.

He swivelled around and fixed me with his cool gaze again. "Why ask? Do opera tickets have to bear names nowadays? If it hadn't been him, I could have sworn there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Blast it! Blast me! And blast the opera! Who needed Mozart and Meyerbeer anyway?

I hid my face behind the appointment book and wished it were larger.

"Just curious."

"Undoubtedly."

"Any more appointments, Sir?"

Mercifully, we moved on from the subject of opera and he kept me busy enough writing down more appointments that I didn't even think too much about Miss Hamilton. When I was finally finished with the thirty-sixth appointment, he nodded curtly.

"Give me the book and let me see."

Handing him the book, I waited for his judgement. I knew my handwriting wasn't very good, and he had talked with the speed of a spinning Jenny. His face was, as ever, indecipherable as the studded page, giving me no clue as to what he might be thinking. Finally, he closed the book with a snap.

"Adequate," he said. "You managed to take it down without leaving anything out, which is more than I can say of my last five secretaries."

It took me a moment to realize that this had actually been a compliment. When I did, a ridiculous grin spread over my face. What was wrong with me? Why did his approval give me this warm, fuzzy feeling inside, like drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter morning? Except hot chocolate didn't stare at me so disapprovingly. Not ever.

"If you're quite done exhausting your facial musculature needlessly, Mr Linton, then perhaps we can move on with work?"

"Yes, Sir! Just as you say."

"Put this away again." He handed me the appointment book.

"Remember, you're responsible for it."

Still exhausting my facial muscles in what I thought was a definitely not needless expression of satisfaction, I hurried back into my o ice. As I bent to open the drawer, the appointment book slipped out of my hand and fell to the floor, opening at the previous week. Picking it up, I saw that the week was covered with appointments: Mr Ambrose must have le his o ice without telling me. All the appointments were written down in a familiar neat and precise hand.

He had been keeping track of his own appointments! It had been silly of me not to think of this, really, a er all, it was a secretary's job to take care of appointments, so why had it not been part of mine?

The answer was evident: because he didn't trust me to handle them! Had he been afraid that - silly, overexcited female that I supposedly was - I would send him to a brothel-house in the east end instead of the Bank of England? A storm of indignation began to brew in me, and the barometer of my temper started to rise. But then I suddenly remembered that now he hadn't trusted me with the appointment book.

Did this mean he was finally coming around? Was he beginning to accept me? Maybe, soon I could drop this ridiculous charade of pretending to be a man, and he would stop calling me "Mr Linton".

An image flashed in front of my eyes: I entering the big hall downstairs, in an undoubtedly feminine dress, my head held high, going up to work for one of London's most powerful businesses. The first ever lady to earn her own way in this world...

"Mr Linton!"

"Blast!

Just like that, a cold voice from the neighbouring room shattered my daydream. Quickly, I put the appointment book away, and made my way back to my employer's o ice. Not quickly enough for his taste, though, apparently.

"What did I tell you, Mr Linton?"

I straightened, knowing exactly what he wanted me to hear.

"That knowledge is power is time is money, Sir."

"Which means you have to be what...?"

"Quick and efficient, Sir."

"Indeed. Now go to your desk, get notepaper and a pen."

Wondering what the heck he wanted me to do now, I fetched the required items and returned, receiving no admonishment this time.

"I have a business letter to write," he declared when I had taken up my station beside his desk, a notepad in hand. "Obviously, you are not what I wish for in a secretary, and have very limited abilities, but my handwriting is not elegant enough for o icial letters and I need somebody to do this. It might as well be you."

I tried my best not to look at him. Having just seen a sample of his handwriting, I knew there was nothing whatsoever wrong with it. In fact, his clear, precise script was one of the most beautiful hands I had ever seen. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips, and I hid behind the notepad. I had been right. He was beginning to accept me, even if he'd rather die than admit it.

"The letter is to a very important business partner of mine," he warned. "Make one mistake, and I shall be very displeased"

I couldn't help remembering what had happened to the last guy that had "displeased" him: hauled o by Karim into the misty alleys of London, never to be seen again. But surely he wouldn't do something like that to me simply for making a mistake in a business letter, would he?

Um... would he?

He went o before I had a chance to ponder this further. If I'd thought his listing of appointments had been fast, it was nothing to how he raced through that letter. He seemed to have it all perfectly written out in his head already, and was just reading o a wall in front of his inner eye. Not once did he stumble or think in enumerating figures, trade routes, factories and a million other things I had never even heard of before.

By the time we had finished, I had filled five pages and my hand was screaming for a relaxing bath in hot water. With my le hand, because my right one was on strike right now, I picked up the hand-written pages and handed them to Mr Ambrose.

He let his cold gaze wander over them. I held my breath again.

Please, God, no mistakes, no mistakes, no mistakes...

"Passable," he allowed.

Thank the Lord! It had to be faultless. If there had been any mistakes, I was sure he could not have resisted pointing each one out to me before dismissing me for failing in my duty.

"Try to remember next time that you are a human being writing, not a hen with inky feet running all across a sheet of paper," he added.

I pursed my lips, suppressing the urge to slap go for his throat.

"Any other constructive criticism, Sir?"

"No, that is it for now."

He grabbed a piece of paper and scrawled down something, which he then handed to me. "Here. Address the letter to this address and put it out on Stone's desk. Stone will take care of posting it."

"Yes, Sir."

Taking the letter from him, I hurried back into my o ice and did as I had been told. Inside of me, conflicting emotions were fighting a fierce battle. The appointment book, the letter... was he beginning to trust me, or was I reading too much into this?

Yes a nasty little voice inside me said. You are.

Bloody hell! But I wanted so much for him to trust me!

You may want anything you like - that doesn't mean you'll get it.

A er his last words last time we had been at work together, when he had practically threatened to find an excuse to get rid of me, I had been plagued by anxiety. I remembered so well our words before we had parted.

"I have my own Empire, and consequently must deal with my own espionage and fight my own wars, Mr Linton. Right now, a war is coming."

"A... war? Over one piece of paper?"

"Yes. A war. Possibly the biggest I've ever fought. If I don't want you to be caught in the crossfire, I cannot have a girl being in danger!"

But did these words still count? Somehow, a er what had happened today, I felt a strange mix of hope and fear inside me.

But its fear that's the biggest part, isn't it?

Bloody hell! Sometimes I really wish that inner voice of mine would shut up! I neede his position, more than ever now, and not just for myself. I didn't know how things were going to go with Ella, but there was always the worst possibility of all: that she would end up alone and disgraced, forsaken by her family and her so-called lover, and maybe even with child. Things like that had happened before. Now and then you read about such a scandal in the papers. Young love run mad...

If it came to that, I would be there to save her, with enough money to take care of her. That, I had sworn to myself.

Angrily, I stepped out into the hallway and slammed the letter onto Mr Stone's desk. I shouldn't think like this! I shouldn't give up hope. There was still time to discover a way to scare o Wilkins. Yet with every second that passed, I felt the darkness circle closer around my little sister. I needed this job! I had to keep it!

But it's not really up to you, is it? It's up to that stone-faced bastard in the o ice over there. Do you think he'll ever really accept you for who you are?

Well, there was one way to find out. One way to see whether his earlier doubts about me had been laid to rest.

Swallowing my apprehension, I returned to his o ice and made a little bow which he didn't seem to notice.

"Letter deposited as ordered, Sir."

"I see. Then I have another task for you. L..."

"Sir?"

He looked up, and I might actually have detected a minuscule morsel of surprise on his face. Surprise that anyone, even such a despicable creature as me, dared to interrupt him.

"Yes, Mr Linton?"

"I have a question, Sir."

Carefully he put down his papers, and intertwined his fingers, regarding me over them like a sharpshooter taking aim.

"Indeed? Well, then fire away."

I swallowed.

"Have we found out where the stolen file is, yet, Sir? When are we going a er it?"

My Dear Lords, Ladies, & Gentlemen,

My oh my... How do you think Mr Ambrose shall react to a female trying to interfere in dangerous affairs? Pleased or displeased? :-)

The title has come for some head-butting! Yay!

Incidentally, anybody who happens to be interested in reading more about our dear Lilly and Mr Rikkard Ambrose before next Wednesday can go straight to the 'Storm & Silence'-Spino-o 'Up and Down', a short story that was inspired by an intriguing new movie. You can find it by clicking on the external link of this installment! :-)

Your Victorian writer (rubbing his hands expectantly)

Sir Rob.

P.S.: If any of you are wondering about the sticker that's currently on the cover of this book: Storm and Silence has been picked by Cadbury - the company started by the gentleman who invented solid chocolate, and who I mention in my story - for their 'Guilty Pleasures' reading list. Isn't that fantastically sweet :)

GLOSSARY:

Spinning Jenny: Not the name of a circus artist famous for her fast cartwheels, or anything like that. No, the "Spinning Jenny" is one of the first industrial machines invented during the industrial revolution in England, by James Hargreaves. I've included a portrait of the lovely Jenny.

Continue reading next part