61. Cosy Little Coach Ride

"Why did you do it?" I demanded. "Why did you try to make me believe that you were in love with Miss Hamilton?"

Silence. Icy silence, which filled the space around us completely and absolutely.

There wasn't much space to fill, in any case. We were stu ed into a chaise, Karim, Mr Ambrose and I. Or rather Mr Ambrose and I were actually *in* the chaise, while Karim's huge form sat, perched precariously at the edge. He was propelling us forward, yelling and wielding the whip, making the little chaise jolt and swerve insanely.

Why? Why have we taken such a miserable little ride?

I had dared to ask that question before we got in, and it turned out that this, apparently, was the only coach actually owned by the unimaginably rich Mr Ambrose: a creaky old chaise, drawn by one shaggy little grey beast of a horse.

"Why do you own this? Why not a proper coach?" I had asked.

"Because it's cheap and fast. But if you prefer to wait for the queen's carriage, by all means, stay here."

Ignoring him, I had clambered into the chaise and Karim, not paying the slightest attention to the light rain that had begun to fall, had swung himself onto the precarious strip of wood that, in a bigger coach, would have been a real box to sit on. Besides being his loyal bodyguard and sabre-carrying scarecrow, he appeared also to fulfil the function of Mr Ambrose's coach driver.

Now we were rattling through the darkening streets of London at an alarming speed, swaying from right to le in a way that never let me forget we only had two wheels under us, and the beast of a horse at the front was all that was keeping us upright. I hoped with all my heart it wasn't as mean as it looked.

The chaise swerved around a corner, and a shower of rain hit me in the face. I shuddered. The thing had only half a roof and one wall. It was meant for driving through the park on a nice Sunday, not racing through the pouring rain in the middle of the night! But did that stop Mr Thick-headed Stinginess Ambrose? Of course not!

"Why did you try to make me believe that you were in love with Miss Hamilton?" I asked once again. I had already asked that question about half a dozen times since we le Empire House. So far, I hadn't gotten an answer. Mr Ambrose just sat in his corner of the chaise and brooded, silently. Say what you will about his other traits, but he was an expert at silent brooding. Disapproval at my incessant questions, and at my presence, gender and existence in general radiated o him like heatwaves. Unfortunately, unlike heatwaves, it did nothing to warm my soaked clothes.

"Tell me!" I insisted. "You're about as likely to be in love as the doorknob of my privy door back home! Why did you pretend to be in love with her?"

With a cold look in my direction, Mr Ambrose leaned out of the window. "Karim!"

The big Mohammedan shi ed, turning around. His weight made the little vehicle lean to the side in a dangerous way, and I had to work hard to stifle a scream. Only the knowledge of the way Mr Ambrose would look at me if I screeched like a silly damsel in distress kept my teeth firmly clamped together.

"Yes, *Sahib*?" our driver enquired, calmly, not at all bothered by his masters cold look.

"Karim, is there any particular reason why this... individual is accompanying us?" He pointed to me.

Karim shrugged. "She wanted to get in the coach. So, she got on into the coach, *Sahib*."

"Just in case you didn't notice, I'm sitting right next to you," I pointed out, staring daggers at Mr Ambrose.

He ignored me.

"I know she got into the coach, Karim. I want to know *why*. Did I give orders for her to accompany us?"

"No, *Sahib*."

"In fact, I remember distinctly saying that she was not to be involved in the search for the file, correct?"

"Yes, *Sahib*."

"So, I repeat, and trust me, I won't do it again: why is she here?"

"It is rude to talk about people as if they weren't there!" I snapped. "And even more rude not to answer their questions! What about Miss Hamilton?"

Again I was ignored. Karim shrugged, and it was a mystery to me how he managed to do that without falling out of the coach. The chaise swayed again, and the horse whinnied.

"A shrug?" Mr Ambrose's eyes narrowed infinitesimally. "That's all? Why didn't you stop her?"

"Why did not you, Sahib?" Karim asked, dead-pan.

Silence.

""She wanted to get in the coach," he repeated. "She is the woman that is worse than *Ifrit*. I do not disagree with a woman that is worse than *Ifrit*."

Mr Ambrose gave his servant another cold glare, which the Mohammedan dutifully ignored. From Mr Ambrose stonier-than-stone face, long past granite and transcended into the realms of fossils, I gathered he didn't like to be ignored.

Well, neither did I!

"Excuse *me*!" Impatiently, I tapped on his shoulder. "Will you answer my question now? Why the heck did you pretend to be in love with that shrew?"

Immediately, Mr Ambrose switched targets. His frostbite-inducing stare, before directing at Karim, now turned to me.

"Have you forgotten what I told you, Mr Linton? As long as you are in my employ, you will speak respectfully to me, and refer to me as 'Master' or 'Sir'."

Swallowing the answer I would have liked to deliver, I gave him a tight smile.

"Yes, of course, *Sir*. I thought you said earlier, *Sir*, that you had decided to dismiss me, so I no longer considered a formal address necessary. I am so glad you have changed your mind and will allow me to continue to work for you, *Sir*."

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I've changed my mind. Be as rude as you want to me. You're dismissed."

"Oh no, *Sir*. I couldn't possibly forsake you in your hour of need." I pointed out the window at the wet houses rushing past in the gathering darkness. "Besides, we're already on our way to get the stolen file back. You can't stop now, when that might mean that it could slip through your fingers."

He studied me, his eyes narrowing the fraction of an inch.

"I'm not going to get rid of you, am I?"

"No, Sir."

"I am the Master here! I can decide to dismiss you whenever I want."

"You gave your word, remember? Your word that I would get this position."

"Get it, not keep it."

"Did I do anything to deserve to lose it?"

Silence.

"Well, Sir? Did I? Really, honestly? On your honour as a gentleman?"

Silence.

Then, speaking as if every world was a painfully pulled tooth, he said: "No! Congratulations! You managed to disobey me and ridicule me by following my instructions to the letter! I cannot dismiss you!"

With a happy little smile on my face, which I made sure he couldn't see, I snuggled into the moth-eaten old upholstery of the chaise bench, creating my own little corner of warmth.

"I'm very gratified to hear it, Sir," I mumbled. "So I suppose this means I'm still in your employ?"

It was impressive how he managed to sound both displeased and grudging, while at the same time maintaining a perfectly cool, aloof voice. "I suppose that is correct."

Maybe I even heard a little admiration there. But no, I was probably mistaken.

"Good. Then perhaps *now* you can answer my question: Why pretend to be in love with Miss Hamilton?"

His le little finger twitched, minutely. For him, that was the equivalent of an impressive scowl.

"You don't give up, do you, Mr Linton?"

"No, Mr Ambrose."

He sighed. It was such an unusual thing for him to do that it made me come out of my little protective corner of warmth and turn towards him. But he had turned away from me, and was looking out of the chaise window. For a minute or two he didn't say anything. I had almost opened my mouth to ask once again when he suddenly began:

"When I spoke to you at the ball – you remember, when we were dancing?"

"Oh yes, I remember." I suppressed a snort. Rotating around the ballroom with the granite statue of London's richest businessman holding me close—I wasn't about to forget that in a hurry! It surely had to have been one of the most awkward moments of my life. And yet, I realized suddenly, in retrospect, a moment oddly dear to me. Strange.

"When I first saw you at the ball, I was... quite disturbed." His jaw twitched, betraying the roiling tension under his stony façade. "To see you like that, so feminine and vulnerable, in the same room as *him*, the very man I had tried to keep you away from as much as possible – it was... not pleasant."

He paused for a moment, then continued.

"Why were you there? I had no idea, and the question didn't stop hounding me. I decided I had to get you alone, to find out how much you knew—get you to leave, if possible. So I asked you to dance and struck up a conversation. And then you told me that you knew why I was attending the ball."

He shook his head.

"I would never thought that you would guess Lord Dalgliesh's involvement in this dark a air and my resulting interest in him. It meant that you were in considerably greater danger than I had previously imagined. I was starting to run through emergency plans, when you continued to speak and I realized that you thought I was there not for Lord Dalgliesh but for *Miss Hamilton*." He gave a derisive noise that made it quite clear how absurd he thought such an idea. "I was... quite relieved."

"You still haven't answered my question! Why pretend to be in love with Miss Hamilton, *Sir*?" Nobody would be able to accuse me of not being focused on my target.

"I am coming to that, Mr Linton," he snapped.

"Yes, Sir."

"Don't interrupt me again!"

"No, Sir. I'm sorry, Sir."

I waited.

He took a deep breath.

"As soon as I realized your misconception, my mind was dominated by the thought of trying to keep you from realizing the true reason for my presence. I could only keep you out of the path of danger by keeping you from seeing the true identity of my enemy. The best way I could think of doing that was to further foster your fallacy and pretend a romantic interest in Miss Hamilton."

"Oh."

I thought for a moment, then asked: "And why did you want to keep me out of danger so badly?"

Immediately as I spoke the question, I saw the answer. Holding a hand up I said: "No, don't bother to answer that. It was because I'm a *girl*, because I am *weak* and I have no business meddling in men's a airs, right?"

He hesitated, his face still turned towards the window, away from me, so I couldn't read his expression. What did it matter? He never had one, anyway.

"Yes. Yes, Mr Linton. That was the only reason."

"I see. Well, let me tell you, you didn't do a very good job. Pretending to be in love, I mean. I could see right through you!"

He turned then, and looked at me.

"Could you indeed? Can you?"

"Yes!" I flushed. "Of course I could! It was obvious you weren't interested. She's such a boring, superficial creature."

"Oh really? Some men might find her quite charming."

"Nonsense! Did you hear her conversations at the ball? All she talked about was dresses and dancing and the right way to hold fans! She has nothing in her head but stale air and dead flies!"

Mr Ambrose shrugged.

"What of it? Some men prefer their brides unintelligent. A er all, women are supposed to do housework and little else. You do not need much intelligence for that."

"Only stupid men would want stupid wives! Marriage is supposed to be a union between two equals who love and support each other, not a master-slave relationship in which the man commands a docile woman."

"There's something to be said for docile women." He leaned forward, spearing me with his dark gaze. "They don't argue with you, for one!"

"And there's something to be said for progressive men. *They* don't normally have such thick heads that women *need* to argue with them! *They* have learned to listen to what women have to say."

"I pity them thoroughly!"

Angrily, I turned my head away. He was impossible! Why I made all this e ort to get accepted by him was becoming more and more of a mystery to me. He obviously would never learn to see me as more than a temporary annoyance.

Why was I doing this? Why was I in this coach? I could be going home right now, looking forward to another boring, safe day at the o ice tomorrow. Instead I was in this miserable little chaise with him, on my way to God only knew where, to deliberately put myself in danger. And for what? The acceptance of a man! Bah!

"So... are you really?"

The question was out of my mouth before I knew it.

"Am I what, Mr Linton?"

"Interested in her. Romantically, I mean."

I sneaked a look at him out of the corner of my eye. He too wasn't looking directly at me. He was pretending to stare out of the window. But his dark pupils betrayed him. They were watching me out of the corner of his eye, just like mine were on him.

He said nothing.

Why the Dickens did I ask that? Why would I even be interested in Mr Ambrose's romantic life, or, more likely, the lack of it? The man was as romantic as a block of wood! A very attractive block of wood, certainly, but still a block of wood! He wasn't interested in anyone.

And still, the thought of him being in love with that Hamilton-wench...!

I shook my head, trying to ignore the heat that was rising in my cheeks.

Still I had gotten no answer.

"Well, Sir?" I repeated my question. "Are you interested in her?"

This time, I hadn't sounded angry. For some reason, my voice had been low, and so er than I had ever heard it.

Slowly, he began to turn towards me. His sea-coloured eyes met mine, and they seemed darker than usual, the colour of storm.

"Not in her, no."

What? What was that supposed to mean?

Wetting my lips, I opened my mouth. It suddenly felt very dry. "Mr Ambrose... Sir..."

"*Sahib*?"

Karim's face appeared only inches away from us. Let me tell you, it's rather disturbing to be staring into Mr Ambrose's eyes and then suddenly have a bushy black beard shoved into your face.

"It's rude to interrupt!" I snapped. "Can't you see we're having a conversation?"

Karim didn't seem perturbed. "Yes, I can. I just thought you would like to know..."

The Mohammedan pointed straight ahead. Only then did I realize something which I hadn't noticed before because I had been so intent on Mr Ambrose: the coach had stopped moving.

"We've arrived," Karim said. As he swung down from the chaise, I could see he had his hand at his belt, around the hilt of his sabre. "Shall we go?"

My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Lilly is simply too tough to simply be pushed aside! I must admit, I seldom enjoyed writing a paragraph as much as when Karim & Mr Ambrose squabble about whose duty it was going to be to keep Lilly out of the coach ;-)

And did you catch Mr Ambrose almost admitting something rather important there...?

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

PS: I included a picture of a 19h-century chaise, so you can imagine how uncomfortable poor old Karim must feel, sitting on the edge.

Continue reading next part