

07. His Indecent Demands

As the doors closed behind me, my eyes were drawn immediately to the dark figure standing in front of the window at the opposite end of the room. Heavy curtains half covered the large windows even this early in the morning, and the lean figure of the man was cast in shadows. I could not see his face. But I could feel his eyes on me.

Quickly, I glanced around. No landscapes on the wall. No tapestries. Not even a portrait of dear X with his wife Y their three large, hairy dogs. God, did this man have an allergy to decoration? Maybe I should have chosen the simpler of my dresses for this meeting a er all. To my le , massive wooden bookshelves covered one wall, but the rest of the walls weren't panelled wood as was customary in most o ices. They weren't even painted, but consisted of the same dark stone as the outside of the building.

Yes, I had diagnosed the decoration allergy correctly. And I didn't even have a medical degree.

My eyes returned to the man at the window. Suddenly, he moved and sat down at the large wooden desk that, besides the bookshelves, was pretty much the only piece of furniture in the room. Light from the window fell onto his face and illuminated the hard, chiselled features of Mr Rikkard Ambrose. Again it struck me that, for a man, he didn't look half bad – maybe not even a quarter. For some reason, my heart rate picked up as I looked at him.

'Welcome,' Mr Ambrose said in a cool voice. 'Kind of you to drop by. Take a seat.'

My mouth dropped open. I had expected him to be angry. Boiling mad, even. But there he was, as cool as a cucumber.

Hesitantly I went to the visitor's chair opposite his own. As soon as I had sat down, I regretted it. The thing was made of plain, hard wood and almost hurt to sit on. I straightened my back and it got a little better.

With agonizing slowness, Mr Rikkard Ambrose rested his elbows on the desk in front of him and steepled his fingers. Over the tops of his finely manicured hands, he regarded me with those dark, sea-coloured eyes of his. Dark eyes in which I could see something roil.

'Well?' he said, a er two or three seconds of silence. 'I believe I already told you that I do not appreciate time-wasters, Miss... Linton, was it?'

I nodded.

'So what do you want?'

I swallowed, and said nothing. God, how to phrase this?

He regarded me coolly for a few more moments, then added: 'If you are concerned about me pressing charges against you, do not worry. I have no desire to ruin a lady's reputation, especially the reputation of a "lady" who is not right in the head.' He looked down at his desk and studied a few papers lying there. 'If that is all, Miss Linton...'

The dismissal was obvious in his tone of voice. But I didn't pay attention. I was still too busy processing the 'not-right-in-the-head' comment. Not right in the head? Why? Because I put on a pair of trousers? Because I wanted a say in the government of my country?

I'll give him not right in the head!

'Actually, no,' I blurted out, my voice coming out sharper than I had intended. 'That wasn't why I came. I came because you requested it. I came to take up the position of your private secretary.'

His eyes, having perused line a er line of whatever document lay before him, froze. Then they snapped up to me. His face seemed not quite as expressionless as before. Silence hovered over the two of us, thick and heavy. Finally he said: 'But you are a girl.'

I bowed my head in what I hoped would be a demure manner. But it probably looked more sarcastic than demure.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

'How kind of you to notice, Mr Ambrose.'

His gaze travelled up and down my figure, taking in the hoop skirt, my styled hair and various parts of my anatomy pushed into the right place by my corset.

'Not so very kind. The fact is rather hard to overlook.'

'You were not so observant the last time we met!'

He narrowed his eyes about a millimetre. 'The last time we met, you had taken great pains to disguise yourself, if I remember, in a manner some might call infamous and outrageous.'

I narrowed my eyes more than just a millimetre and crossed my arms defiantly.

'I was wearing trousers! Why is that infamous? They're just a piece of cloth and don't make me any less of a girl. If you went around dressed in a ball gown, would that make you any less of a man?'

'I'm afraid I've never yet made the experiment, Miss Linton,' he replied, frostily.

A mental image popped into my head of Mr Cold Masculinity Ambrose in a frilly o -the-shoulders ball gown with a big hoop skirt and a paper fan in his hand. I had to work hard to keep from laughing. His tone told me that that wouldn't have been a good idea. He didn't seem to be a person who appreciated mirth, to put it mildly.

So instead of laughing at him, I did the next best thing. I fixed him with a determined look and said: 'We're wandering from the subject. I didn't come here to talk to you about fashion. I came to work.'

Shaking his head derisively, he asked: 'So you persist in this ludicrous claim that you want to work as my secretary?'

'I do, and it isn't ludicrous. When can I take up my new duties?'

'You can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I will most certainly not give you the position.'

'Why not?'

'I do not have to explain myself to you, Miss Linton.'

Panic started to well up inside me, and I did my best to push it back down. This was what I had feared. He wouldn't even consider taking me on. He would throw me out. Now I had only one last chance. It all depended on one question now: was Mr Rikkard Ambrose a gentleman, or only a man?

'You o ered me the position,' I said in a so voice. 'Do you break your word so easily, Sir?'

Anger flashed in his eyes, and I could see it: the wounded honour of a gentleman. Yes! I had him!

'You dare impugn my honour, Miss?' he demanded, his voice deadly quiet. I knew that had I been a man, he would have flung his glove at me, and I would have had to meet him the next day with a bloody satisfaction. But I was not a man, and he was trapped. The only thing he could do was break his word – or honour it.

'Yes,' I answered, breathless. 'If you do not keep your word, I do.'

'My word would not be broken,' he said, in that quiet voice that sent a shiver down my back. 'You deceived me.'

'How so?' My crossed arms tightened in front of my chest. This was going to be a heavy battle.

'I hired you under the misapprehension that you were a man.'

'I never said I was. In fact, I specifically told you that I wasn't the man for the job.'

He seemed stunned for just a moment. Then, taking in a deep breath, he admitted: 'So you did. Still, you can't have the position.'

'Why? Has the position already been filled?'

He hesitated for a second, then said in a slightly grudging voice: 'No.'

'Has anyone better qualified than I applied?'

'Anyonewould be better than you.'

My face hardened. 'How so?'

He placed his hands on the desktop, as if trying to suck up calm from the even surface.

'A girl working as a secretary?' he growled. 'It is impossible! If the city were to get wind of this it would be the biggest scandal in years! Besides, females do not have the orderly mind that is required for this kind of work.'

'Of course they do! We have been kept down for centuries, but you'll see, one day women will conquer their rightful place in the world! One day, there will be hundreds, maybe thousands of women working as secretaries. We will be so good at it that we will put the men out of their jobs, and just about every secretary will be female!'

He shook his head derisively.

'That speech only shows that you have no intellect and grasp of reality. Thousands of women working as secretaries all over the world? The thought is ridiculous.'

'All I want is the chance to prove you wrong.'

'And I said no. You are a girl. I cannot have a girl in my o ice. I would be the laughing stock of the city of London, of the entire country even.'

'I'm sure the city and country will find funnier things to laugh about than you,' I said, regarding his stony face, not able to entirely keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He gave me a stare from those cold, dark eyes that could have frozen lava.

'I don't appreciate being made fun of, Miss Linton.'

'I can see that, Mr Ambrose. And I do not appreciate my questions not being given full and honest replies.'

'What do you mean?'

'Has anyone better qualified than I applied for the position of your private secretary?'

A few seconds hesitation again. Then: 'No.'

'Well then.' Taking a deep breath, I unfolded my arms and rubbed my hands. 'When may I begin with my new duties?'

His hostile stare intensified to a force that almost knocked me o my chair and made the muscles in my stomach tighten with fear.

'I–need–a–man,' he said very slowly, enunciating each word. 'A man, Miss Linton. Not a girl who will run o screaming at the things she will see where my kind of business takes me.'

'I hold you to your word,' I replied, glaring just as stubbornly, though maybe not quite so impressively, back at him. 'I ask you: Are you a gentleman or a liar? You told me to come and work for you. I didn't ask you. And now you want to back out?'

He stared at me. And stared. And stared.

Half a minute.

An entire minute.

A er two minutes, I was getting fidgety and wanted to blink, but didn't. I was not backing down on this. He would have to keep his word or throw me out into the street himself!

Three whole minutes he looked at me like this. Then, towards the end of the third minute, something seemed to spark in his dark eyes, and though his facial expression didn't really change, he somehow suddenly seemed... satisfied. Victorious. Oh no. He had decided to forget about honour and throw me out! I knew it! I just knew it!

'Fine,' he said. 'The position is yours.'

My jaw dropped. What? Had I heard correctly?

'It... it is?' I stammered, unable to contain my surprise.

'Yes,' he said, his voice as cool and calm as ever. 'I gave my word, and my honour is at stake here. Naturally, a gentleman must keep his word. The position of private secretary belongs to you.'

My heart started hammering wildly. Was this really it? Finally? My independence? My chance to build a career as a free woman?

But there was something that wasn't quite right. Mr Ambrose didn't look resigned. In spite of the fact that this should be nettling him to no end, he looked... pleased with himself. Darn pleased with himself. Though of course he didn't go so far as to actually allow a smile to appear on his stony features, I could feel it. Self-satisfaction radiated o him. Like a sleek black cat that doesn't need to smile, only show its claws to prove to the world how superior it is.

'You will, of course, be wearing the proper uniform,' he said, looking down at the papers on his desk again.

I frowned.

'Uniform?' I hadn't seen anyone in his o ice so far who wore a uniform. What was he talking about?

'Certainly,' he replied, still not looking up. 'The same uniform you wore on the day I first had the pleasure to meet you, Mister Linton.'

It took a moment or two, then the penny dropped. I jumped up from my chair as if it had bit me in the arse.

'You expect me to come and work for you dressed up as a mari?' I gasped.

He looked up, sharply. 'I expect you to come to work dressed exactly the same as on the day I acquired your services, Mister Linton. I want exactly what I bought, and I am going to get it. Do you understand that, Mister Linton?'

'I won't do it!'

He was out of his chair and around the desk in a heartbeat.

'It is your choice,' he said, stepping so close to me that our lips were almost touching. 'Either do what I say – or get another job.'

For a moment, my heart stood still as I gazed up into his deep, dark, dangerous eyes. Then I tore myself away from the sight, turned on my heels and angrily stomped towards the door. I threw it open and rushed past the bewildered Mr Stone.

'Good day, Miss Linton,' he called a er me, hardly concealed triumph in his voice.

Well! I thought to myself, We'll just see about that! He wants war? He can have it!

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope I managed to surprise you with the developments in this chapter. Mr Ambrose is one devious son of a bachelor, don't you think so? ;)

Oh, and by the way: I put a picture of a Victorian-style room from a rather more luxurious 19th-century Victorian buildings in the above chapter, with all the features normally in place: tropic wood paneling that covers the walls, valuable antique furniture and a number of other expensive features. This is the kind of room that a man as rich and powerful as Mr Ambrose would normally have inhabited during the nineteenth century. I thought this would be help demonstrate how very abnormal Mr Ambrose's decor (or lack thereof) was, for his time.

And now... what are your guesses? What do you think Lilly will do next? ;)

My humble regards,

Sir Rob