

29. The Key to Him

My ear pressed against the solid metal door, I listened intently for any sound of torture. Not that I knew exactly how torture would sound like, apart from the screaming, of course, which was pretty much a given. Still, it couldn't hurt to try. Not me, at least! I thought with a tiny shiver.

Considering Mr Ambrose words, and even more than that the expression of his eyes, I had no doubt that something terrible was happening in there right now. But I couldn't hear a single sound. Was something the matter with my ears?

But then I suddenly heard footsteps approaching from the other side and hurriedly stepped backwards. A key turned in the lock, and Mr Ambrose exited the room, a ring with a large assortment of keys in his hand.

"And?" I asked. God, I was becoming as monosyllabic as him.

"We've managed to get him awake, but he won't talk." Looking down, I saw that Mr Ambrose hand was clenched to a fist around the ring of keys. "Whoever paid him to do this, they must be powerful and frightening."

"How do you know this?"

He fixed me with his steely dark gaze. "Because I am powerful and frightening, and he hasn't told me a single thing yet. But he will, eventually."

How do you know that? How can you be so sure?

Yet those thoughts were not what I spoke out loud. Instead, out spilled the question that had been plaguing me the entire way back to Empire House, the question which I never thought I would have the gall to ask:

"Will you torture him?"

He looked at me, supreme disdain in his eyes. "No. Of course not."

A momentous weight, which I hadn't really known was there, dropped from my shoulders. "Thank the Lord!" I breathed. "I almost thought..."

"Why would I sully my own hands?" he continued, cutting me off. "I have people who attend to tasks like that for me."

"Oh."

The weight slammed right back in place.

My mood swing had apparently gone completely unnoticed. He motioned towards the closed steel door behind him with a careless finger. "I have put Karim in charge of the investigation, and he has his methods."

"Methods like what?" I demanded. Darn, this was... frightening. Something inside me told me I should report this to the police. But if I did that, I would end up on Mr Ambrose's list of traitors, barring all chances to my independence. I was too selfish to risk my entire future on behalf of some greedy little thief I didn't know from Adam. All right, I know I'm not a very good person! But at least I'll get paid for it soon.

Mr Ambrose still hadn't answered. He was looking at me intently.

"Methods like what?" I repeated the question.

"That's nothing a lady such as yourself needs to concern yourself about."

"Oh, I'm a lady now, am I?"

"Currently, it looks like it," Mr Ambrose said, gesturing towards my dishevelled dress. "More or less, at least. It's high time that you got back into your trousers though, Mr Linton."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Why? Do you have work for me, Sir?"

"No. I'm sending you home early."

I was about to protest when he raised his hands. "I know. I agreed...." he paused to take a deep breath and with effort said: "I agreed to let you work for me, just like any other private secretary. This is not an attempt to get rid of you early. I'm giving you half the day because you've had an exhausting day so far. Trust me, even if you don't notice it now, you'll notice once the excitement of the hunt goes away. You need to rest, and I need to stay with Karim for a bit longer, so right now I don't have anything for you to do. Tomorrow you will come back, and you will work for me as hard as any other."

For a moment I searched his face, trying to determine whether or not he was being truthful. Of course it didn't work. Not with his standard stony expression.

"Promise?" I asked.

He nodded. "I promise, on my honour as a gentleman."

"But..." I hesitated before asking the question. "But I'll still have to come dressed up as a man?"

"Yes." His voice was as hard as granite. "I cannot and will not accept a female secretary. I will not be made a fool of in front of the entire city. Either you come dressed as a man, or you never return."

I nodded. This was hard for me to accept, but it was unavoidable. I turned to leave but Mr Ambrose called me back, and so I turned again.

"What is it, Sir?"

"You know very well what it is. I want to know."

"Want to know what?"

"Your method of course. Well?"

"What method? What are you talking about?" I asked, truly bewildered.

A muscle in his jaw twitched in an annoyed sort of way. "Don't play games with me! How did you do it? Find out where Simmons was?"

Ah! That was what was eating him. I struggled mightily to constrain my grin, but probably failed.

"How about a deal?" I said. "I tell you my method, and you tell me what's in the stolen file?"

His silence was answer enough.

Once again, I saw that mountain of money in front of my inner eye. And he had said it was too little payment...

"I won't tell a soul," I said. "I promise!"

"No!" He shot a glare at me. "I don't have to make any deals with you. You work for me. You will tell me how you did it. Now!"

I hesitated. "Well..."

I told him. I told him everything, with probably more a bit embellishment and gloating than necessary, but true enough. It had worked after all, hadn't it? There was no harm in taking pride in my work.

When I was finished, his stony face was even stonier than before – but his eyes were slightly wider as he gazed at me, and his mouth stood open a fraction.

"Still sure you don't want a female secretary?" I asked.

Then, before he could answer, I curtsied and hurried away.

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I had decided to change back into men's clothes back in my office. It would mean that I would have to change again when I came home, but under no circumstances could I go home in the dress Mr Ambrose had bought for me. None of my family had ever clapped eyes on it before, and besides, it wasn't in very great shape. I was a bit concerned about changing in my office – after all, I couldn't lock the doors, so what if anybody came in? – but there really wasn't anywhere else to go.

As it turned out, my concern was totally unnecessary. On the desk in my office, I found a small package. A note was pinned to it, saying:

Dear Mr Linton,

Mr Ambrose instructed me to leave these for you. A friendly word of caution: It is very unusual for his secretary to be entrusted with these around the clock. Take good care of them.

Yours Sincerely,

Edgar Stone

My curiosity spiked. What was in there? Well, there was only one way to find out. I ripped open the paper around the package, and in a little cardboard box I found a ring of keys, not as large as the one Mr Ambrose had been carrying, but still substantial. On it hung a key labelled Secretary's Office, and another labelled Head Office.

Slowly, a smile spread over my face. He trusted nobody, hm? Well, maybe he was making an exception to the rule.

Then I noticed that there was no key labelled Safe on the ring. Well, it seemed as though he was starting to trust me, at least.

But then, why was he still refusing to reveal the contents of the file...?

I stood there, clutching the set of keys to my chest, feeling oddly emotional. Why, though? Why should it matter to me whether or not my master trusted me? He was just the man I was working for. A man who, as yet, had to pay me my first wages at the end of the month. Whether or not he trusted me was immaterial, as long as I got the money, right?

Yet still, the fact that he was opening up to me touched something deep within me. I felt that maybe, just maybe, he might be starting to respect me. If not as a woman, then at least as an intelligent human being with a head on its shoulders, provided I wore trousers.

Taking the ring of keys, I locked both doors to my office and started the mind-numbing process of changing.

You don't think there's anything more difficult than getting out of a corset and crinoline? Try getting out of a corset and crinoline which are broken and bent in strange angles in at least a dozen places. I felt like a cat trying to squeeze myself through a labyrinth of rat holes.

When I finally stood only in my underwear, it was a relief. It was relief. I was just about to reach for Uncle Burd's trousers, a knick came from the door, and the door rattled as someone pushed against it.

I almost jumped out of my skin.

"Y-yes?" I asked, not sounding very manly at all. I cleared my throat, and tried again. "Yes?"

"Mr Linton? It's me, Mr Stone. May I come in?"

"Err... not as such, no."

"Why? Are you busy?"

No, I'm standing around in women's underwear, which, apart from being pretty indecent, makes it more or less obvious that I'm a girl.

"Um... yes, that's it. Very busy. Very, very, very busy in fact."

"I see. Well, then I won't disturb you any further. I just wanted to ask if you found the keys all right?"

"Yes, I did."

Yes I did, thank God, or else my office door wouldn't be locked right now, and you'd be staring at me in my drawers!

"Very well. I understand you're leaving now, Mr Linton?"

"Yes."

"And Mr Ambrose?"

"He's very, very busy too, Mr Stone."

"I see. Well, I'll leave you alone then. Till tomorrow."

"Yes, goodbye, Mr Stone."

I heard him moving away and let out the breath I had been holding. I'm not sure what Mr Ambrose's reaction would be to someone discovering my true gender, but he wouldn't be jumping up and down with joy, that much I could tell. Maybe he would be jumping up and down on me instead, wearing iron-shod boots.

Though he probably would shrink from such a display of emotion. He would get Karim to do it. The big fellow would be excellently suited for the task, and all too happy to oblige. For some reason, the thought brought a smile to my face.

Grabbing Uncle Burd's trousers, I dressed in my unusually usual outfit again and locked the door behind me. Not that I thought somebody might steal my fountain pen, it just was a good feeling. My pocket. My door. My key. Sticking the keys securely into my deepest pocket, I began the long descent down to street level.

I didn't call a cab. Luxuries like that would have to wait until I actually received my first pay check. Instead I walked home, slowly, enjoying for the first time in my life the feeling I had done something useful. No sitting around trying to knit or sew, no silly whirling around in a ballroom full of overdressed nitwits. I had been out there in the real, rough world. And I would return there soon.

My exultation lasted all the way home. As I went in through the garden door and into the shed to change, slowly my feelings of joy waned and I suppressed a yawn. God, my legs hurt from all that running over roofs. The real world was pretty tiring.

As I approached the front door, another concentrated wave of tiredness hit me. Mr Ambrose had been right, today had been exhausting. I needed some rest, and I needed it quick. Fortunately, nothing was likely to get in the way of that. My aunt was sure to be too busy with my other sisters to care if I was lazy and slept through the afternoon.

That was when I first heard the excited chatter from inside the house. Strange... It sounded like we had a visitor. But who would come to visit us? I had to be mistaken.

The moment I stepped into the house, though, the door to the salon flew open and my aunt appeared in the doorway. "There she is!" She exclaimed, a triumphant smile on her face. "And just in time. Lilly, my dear, I have a wonderful surprise for you!"

Oh-oh. That didn't sound good.

"What surprise?" I yawned, and blinked furiously to keep my eyes open.

"Look who has come to visit you," my aunt replied smiling, and waved invitingly to somebody in the room. Footsteps could be heard, and then, directly beside my aunt's triumphant visage, appeared the arrogantly smiling face of Lieutenant Ellingham.

He bowed.

"Miss Linton. How delighted I am to see you again."

I straightened, and my eyes narrowed. His arrogant smile widened.

Delighted, eh? We'll see whether you still feel like that in five minutes, Mister...

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now Miss Lilly Linton has to battle two men at the same time :-)

What do you think her odds are?

Sorry for the short author's note today. There was a repeat of a Dr Who episode in Victorian London today, and as a true Victorian Gentleman, I simply had to watch :-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob