

## 55. My lies run away with me

I had le the o ice finally, with goose bumps all over me.

Another method to persuade me. to persuade me to leave... I wondered what that might be. Whatever he was thinking of, I wasn't looking forward to it – not a er he said it in that tone of voice.

Really? You little liar!

I told myself most firmly to shut the hell up! At the moment, I was just too tired to think much about it, or anything else for that matter. I only wanted a nice, so bed a er a long day at work. Still, I had to go through the cumbersome process of changing clothes before I could approach the front of the house. Sighing, I finally stepped through the front door, wishing I were already upstairs.

“Lilly!”

My head whipped around to see my aunt standing right beside me. She had to have been waiting there, behind the door, ready to pounce on me the moment I came in.

“Where were you?” she demanded, her eyes glittering dangerously. “You’ve been gone the whole day!”

Ah, so she had finally caught on to my frequent day-long absences, had she? Amazing what caring surrogate parent she was: it had only taken her a couple of weeks.

Lucky for me, I had a plan ready.

I winked. “You remember the gentleman from the ball the other day?”

Her frown li ed a bit. “You mean...”

“I won’t name names of course,” I said, course, hoping fervently she wouldn’t make me, because I didn’t have any. “But you know... I’ve been seeing a little more of him recently.”

“Oh.” Her eyes went wide. Oh, if that’s the case...”

She smiled. She actually smiled. “Good girl! Now, o to bed with you!”

Thanking God that I had gotten o so easy, I scampered up the stairs. Beautifully! That’s how it had worked, simply beautifully! I would have to come up with a new story soon, of course, as soon as she realized there were no flowers or presents arriving for me. But I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

Up in our shared room, Ella was waiting for me. She sat on her bed and looked up at me with a timidly hopeful smile.

“Have you been out with your young man again?”

I didn’t really see the point of saying no. I had been lying so frequently lately, it had almost become second nature to me. And anyway, this wasn’t technically a lie. I had been with a young man. An incredibly rich, intimidating man whose head I wanted to rip o and feed to piranhas at the moment, but he was still a young man.

“Yes.”

Ella’s cautious smile bloomed into full radiance.

“Really? Did it go well?”

Well, he worked me over pretty hard, I bled a little, and he gave me permission to use his toilet. Nice, isn’t he?

All true, but I didn’t say that. Instead I plastered a smile on my face and told her: “Yes, very well indeed. I think we’re getting to know each other better.”

“Come and sit down.” Ella reached out to me, pleadingly. “Tell me about him.”

Oh Dear God...

Was this a good idea?

Of course not, you idiot! Of course not! Lie your way out of this right away!

I opened my mouth – but Ella was sitting there, all sweet and innocent and eager. “Oh, Lilly, I know you can’t mention his name or anything,” she assured me. “I just want to know what kind of man he is, how you two get along, how you feel about him. Please.”

She looked up at me with big, pleading doe eyes. Damn! Sisters like that should be illegal! Without really meaning to, I took two steps forward and sat down on the bed beside her, putting my arms around her.

“All right,” I said, smiling encouragingly. “What do you want to know?”

“Well... how long have you two known each other?”

Well, that was easy. I could just tell the truth.

“A couple of weeks, now.”

“And how many assignments have you had yet?” she whispered, leaning closer, an eager look in her eyes.

Darn! This wasn’t so easy any more. What should I say? I go to him every day because he pays me for it?

If I said that, she would be jumping to conclusions about my relationship with Mr Ambrose that were even worse than the truth, and her screams of horror would alert the entire household.

“Um... assignments...” Desperately I grabbed for a number. My mind seized on Mr Ambrose’s date book. “Thirty-six,” I blurted out. “Thirty-six assignments.”

“Oh. That is quite a lot.”

It was. And all in one day, too. The fact that I had only noted them down, not actually been there, I choose not to mention.

“And...” Ella leaned closer, lowering her voice, as if now the really important part began. “And how do you feel about him?”

Oh bloody heck! More lying. Well, I suppose it was unavoidable.

I bit my lip.

“I... care about him. But he’s di icult, you know? Taciturn, and cool, and not very free with his money. He keeps me at arms’ length, which isn’t easy to deal with sometimes. But underneath it all, he’s really important to me.”

Goodness, was I doing an amazing job! My lies were delivered brilliantly, in just the right tone of voice, with just the right amount of nervous hesitation. I could see on Ella’s face that she believed me. Heck, I very nearly believed myself, although I knew of course it was all codswallop. Mr Ambrose was a source of income, nothing more, nothing less.

“Lilly, I... I know you don’t want Aunt to know about him.”

Darn right I didn’t! If my aunt found out what I really was doing during my supposedly romantic escapades, she would have a coronary! Worse, she would recover from it and come a er me!

“So I’m guessing,” Ella continued cautiously, “that he’s not very respectable, or not very wealthy.”

I smirked. Ella had always lost guessing games. She couldn’t have been more wrong in this case. From what I had gathered, half the mothers in London were out to get Rikkard Ambrose for their maiden daughters, and the other half was not similarly engaged only because Lord Dalgliesh was also in town.

“So... have you ever thought about running away with him?”

The question hit me like a steam engine. So that was what this was all about! I had wondered why, this late in the evening, she would be here in her room, and not outside in the garden with Edmund. Now I knew! He was out fermenting his escape plans, and she was seeking reassurance. And who better to give you that than her big sister, who just also happened to have romantic troubles?

Or at least in Ella’s imagination.

Curse my lies! They had turned out to be bleeding inconvenient! I cleared my throat, trying to banish a mental image of Mr Ambrose slinging me over his shoulder and dragging me to the nearest altar.

“Um... not really. We aren’t really quite that far in our relationship.”

Damn right you aren’t! For example, you’ll first have to get an actual relationship! One that involved more than you having me carry around files and jumping at his every command, that is!

“But if he asked you,” Ella insisted, clearly determined to get an answer, her eyes looking large and forlorn, “would you run away with him?”

Unbidden, the image of Mr Ambrose slinging me over his shoulder shoved its way back into my thoughts. Of course we wouldn’t embark on our elopement in a comfortable coach – a chaise would have to do, if we wouldn’t walk. Real carriages were, a er all, much too expensive. And we wouldn’t get married by special license either, for that cost money too. Once we had gotten married in some country church by a young priest who didn’t ask too much of a fee, we would return to London and spend our honeymoon sorting through the business correspondence that had arrived in our absence.

I shook my head at the absurd image, and a smile crept onto my lips. “Of course.” The words had slipped out before I had even noticed. “Of course I would run away with him.”

God! This was taking the convincing lying a bit far, wasn’t it? A er all, I wanted to dissuadher from eloping, not encourageher! What was I doing?

I was of course being sarcastic and insincere, but Ella couldn’t know that, the poor girl! Somehow, when I spouted that outrageous lie just now, I had managed to make my voice sound horribly convincing!

“Oh.” Ella’s shoulders slumped and she looked even more lost than before. I had been right. She had been looking for advice on her own situation, and this obviously hadn’t been the answer she had been expecting. She had probably expected words of caution from her big sister.

“That doesn’t mean that you should, though,” I added hastily. “If you ever were in that kind of situation, I mean, hypothetically. What I would do isn’t necessarily the best thing. You know I’m a reckless maniac who should probably be locked up for her own safety.”

“Oh, Lilly!” Ella tried her best, but couldn’t keep a smile o her face. “You shouldn’t say such things!”

“Why not, if they make you smile?” I teased and drew her closer towards me. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. Everything will be just fine.”

I was really an excellent liar. Later, when I lay in bed and watched Ella sleep with a peaceful smile on her face, I wondered how I had managed to give her so much reassurance. I certainly didn’t feel sure of myself, or of my ability to help her. The unknown date when she would forever be snatched away from me was drawing closer.

What... what if I simply talked with her about it? Tried to talk her out of it?

But then I remembered the fire in her eyes when she had looked at Edmund, and knew that talking wouldn’t do any good. It might only serve to destroy her trust in me. I only had one chance: find a way to get rid of Wilkins before it was too late! And I would do so, and I would make Mr Ambrose fully accept me, and the day a er tomorrow I would challenge British Chauvinism and demonstrate for women’s su rage with my friends at the chauvinist’s convention in Hyde Park. I had a lot of obstacles in my way, but none of them were going to stop me! Least of all a certain detestable, handsome, rich businessman!

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Taking a deep breath, I walked down the hallway. In passing, I nodded to Mr Stone.

“Good Morning, Mr Stone.

He smiled and nodded back at me.

“Good Morning, Mr Linton.”

For a moment I hesitated, wondering whether I should enter my own o ice, not that of Mr Ambrose. His words rang through my mind again: I shall simply have to find another method to... persuade you.

No matter how morbidly curious a part of me might be, I didn’t want to find out what that meant. I wasn’t suicidal.

Don’t be a chicken, Lilly! You know it’s far better to face his next attack head-on. If you don’t come directly into his o ice, he’s bound to see it as another attempt at time-wasting.

So I squared my shoulders, marched past Mr Stone’s desk and pushed open the door to Mr Ambrose’s o ice, ready for whatever might await me.

“Ah, Mr Linton, there you are! How nice to see you! Come in, come in and make yourself comfortable!”

I was just over the threshold when the words and the scene before me registered, and I stopped in my tracks.

I had been wrong. I had not been ready for whatever awaited me. I certainly wasn’t ready for a Mr Rikkard Ambrose standing in front of me with a broad smile on his outrageously handsome face.

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**My Dear Lords and Ladies,**

**Some of you have been wondering why I gave three whole chapters to the Ella / Edmund romance when this book is really about Lilly and a certain cold, silent businessman. I hope this chapter provides an answer. Does the humor of the two sisters comparing their ‘relationships’ come across like I intended? ;-)**

**By the way, Vaelor, one of my noble (and most talented) readers, has sent me a great fan-art of Miss Lilly Linton in female attire and male disguise. I’ve included it with this chapter, although it really deserves to be put in a gold frame and hung in the British Museum! :)**

**Your (art-admiring) Victorian writer**

**Sir Rob**