

06. Empire House

Inside it was dark. The sun hadn't risen above the houses of London yet, so only a little light fell through the high, narrow windows. What light there was, though, was sufficient to illuminate the scene in front of me well enough to make my throat constrict.

I was standing at the entrance to an enormous hall, at least seventy feet across. Apart from the gigantic cast iron chandelier hanging from the ceiling and the galleries high up on the walls, there was no decoration of any kind. No portraits, no draperies, nothing. The floor was dark, polished stone; the walls were painted a dark green-blue. In any other place the lack of decoration might have made one think the owner of the building was poor, but not here. The very enormity of this stark cavern repudiated poverty. And besides, it didn't take me long to realize the true reason behind the sparse decoration. I had lived too long with my dear uncle and aunt not to recognize the signs that somebody kept his purse up his arse.

Throughout the hall, people were jogging from one of the many doors to another, carrying pieces of paper, and obviously in a very great hurry to get their business done. The only person who wasn't moving an inch was a sallow-faced old man behind a plain wood counter at the back of the giant room. He simply sat, bent over a book in which he was busy scribbling notes.

Was he the receptionist? Well, there was only one way to find out.

I approached the counter and cleared my throat timidly. The man didn't seem to notice and continued writing in his book.

I cleared my throat again, louder this time, and crossed my arms. This fellow was getting my hackles up!

He finally deigned to look up and examined me over the tops of his small, steel-rimmed spectacles. The face he pulled made me think he wasn't very pleased with what he saw.

'Yes?'

This was it. Last chance to back out. Last chance to leave this place and never come back.

With great effort, I gathered all my courage and said, loudly and clearly: 'I'm here to see Mr Ambrose.'

I couldn't have gotten a more impressive reaction if I had said 'I'm here to see Father Christmas do a naked tap dance on your desk.' Everybody within hearing range stopped to turn towards me. One young clerk fell over his own feet and only just managed not to drop the large pile of papers he was carrying.

'Mr Ambrose?' asked Sallow-face incredulously. 'Mr Rikkard Ambrose?'

'Is there another one here?'

'Most assuredly not, Miss...?'

'Linton. Miss Lillian Linton.'

'Well, Miss Linton,' said Sallow-face, steeping his long fingers in a manner that I'm sure he meant to be threatening, 'Mr Ambrose is a very busy man. He does not have time for everybody who wishes to waste it.' He looked down at his book again. 'If you have come collecting for charity, try Lord Arlington's place, or Lady Metcalf's. I am sure they shall be more than happy to oblige you.'

'I have not come to collect for charity,' I said. 'I have an appointment.'

This time, somebody actually did drop his documents. I heard the clatter behind me, and the hurried noises of someone running a few flying bits of paper. Sallow-face had no eyes for the miscreant, however. His full attention was on me once more, sizing me up, and down, and up again.

'You have an appointment, Miss...?'

'Linton. Yes.'

'With whom, if I may ask?'

'With Mr Ambrose, of course. I already told you I came here to see him. I was told to be here at nine.'

Sallow-face's eyes bored into me, as if he was trying to see a note with the words 'April fool's joke' attached to the back of my head, although it was the middle of summer. 'Told by whom?' he demanded.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

'By Mr Ambrose.'

For the first time, I could see a tiny little bit of uncertainty replace some of the shallowness. Mixed into it was a spark of fear. 'By Mr Ambrose himself? Personally?'

'Yes.'

'Wait a moment, please.'

I was expecting him to jump up and run off, emulating all the other people hurrying around the entrance hall, but instead he remained sitting where he was and picked up a strange metal horn from his desk, which I hadn't noticed before. It was connected to the desk by a thick tube that vanished into the wood.

'Stone? Stone, are you there?' Sallow-face spoke into the metal horn.

I stared at him, stupefied. Had he lost his marbles? Did he think this metal thing was a stone? And if so, why was he talking to it? As far as I knew, neither stones nor metal objects were very verbose.

The man held the horn to his ear – and a faint, tinny voice came out of it! My mouth dropped open. What was this? I couldn't hear what the voice said, but it was unquestionably human. He was talking to someone through that thing!

Sallow-face returned the horn from his ear to his mouth and said: 'Listen, Stone. There is a young... lady here,' he threw me a look that made it clear he privately had other names for me, 'who maintains she has an appointment with Mr Ambrose. Can you check that for me please? Go to Simmons and ask, will you.'

A moment of silence. Then the faint tinny voice started talking again.

'What?' Sallow-face demanded. 'Not there? What do you mean not... Oh, quit his job? I see.'

A thrill went through me, and suddenly I forgot all about the strange listening-horn. Quit his job? They had to be talking about the secretary! The secretary who had left. Had they wanted to check whether I really did have an appointment? That must have been it! So they were actually considering letting me up there. For a moment, I wondered whether I should mention that I was the ex-secretary's replacement. Then I remembered that I was a lady, and ladies didn't work for a living, and if I claimed such a thing, Sallow-face would throw me out for sure.

'Yes, yes,' he snapped at that very moment. 'But what am I to do? If she really has an appointment and I don't let her through, I'll be out on the street tomorrow morning. Yes? So what? What do I care? I say she can go through, so she's your problem now.'

Sallow-face put down the horn from which protesting shrieks were echoing and turned to me with a syrupy smile on his lips.

'Very well, Miss Linton. You can go up to the top floor inquiry desk. Mr Stone is already awaiting you there and anxious to help you.'

Oh, Mister Stone, not a stone. So Sallow-face wasn't barmy. Quite a relief, considering I got my directions from him. He pointed me to an open doorway behind his desk. I thanked him more graciously than he deserved, curtsied, and went through the doorway to find myself in a large hallway. Looking up, I saw steps leading up and around the walls of several floors, and these stairs were even steeper than the ones outside the building.

Dong...

Quickly, I turned my head westwards. There, a small window stood half open, letting a bit of light fall into the stark stone hallway. And through that window there now also came the sound of a bell. A deep, reverberating sound that chilled my bones. Great Paul was striking nine!

Dong...

I jumped over the first two steps, landing on the third and started to race up the stairs taking two at a time. Even so, I had hardly put half a dozen steps behind me when the clock struck again.

Dong...

I redoubled my efforts. I would not stop. I would not give up. And I would certainly not give that man any excuse not to take me on. I would make it in time!

Dong...

On the first landing I had to stop, or my heart would have burst. My legs already burned like hellfire, and my behind seemed to have an elephant attached to it. Blast it! So much for my resilience. I really needed to get more exercise!

Dong...

I reached the second landing. The noise of feet scurrying around and paper rustling that filled the hall downstairs was receding. Even over the reverberations of the bell I could hear that up here it was much quieter. Ominously quiet. My feet resounded hollowly on the steps. Third floor. Yes!

Dong...

I had just reached the fourth landing when a burst of sunlight suddenly blinded me and made me falter. I was high up now, up over the rooftops of all the surrounding houses. The cold morning sunlight penetrated the mist that was swirling around the building and streamed in through one of the narrow windows, illuminating the entire upper hallway in bright colours of gold. Quickly, I resumed my sprint up the stairs. No distractions now! The fifth landing! Onward! Once more unto the breach!

Dong...

The fifth landing. How many floors did this darn building have? I chanced a glance upwards and nearly fell over my feet. Grabbing the railing for support, I pulled myself onto the sixth landing, wheezing with the effort. But I had seen what I needed to see. Only two more floors left!

Dong...

The sixth landing! Nearly there. How many strikes of the clock were still left to me? I quickly counted in my head. Oh no, just one!

Dong...

Clutching my aching chest I stumbled onto the top landing and grabbed wildly at the air to find anything to support me. My hand caught a brass doorknob and clasped it, involuntarily pushing the door open.

I had made it!

Unable to stop, I practically fell into the room beyond. I only came to a stop several fumbling steps later, falling to my knees, gasping, in front of a dark wood desk, behind which sat a narrow-faced young man who seemed rather surprised to find a young woman on the carpet before him.

'Err... Miss?' he said, tentatively.

I tried to speak, but my vocal cords didn't work quite right yet. My lungs were still too busy utilizing my throat for air supply after my sprint up seven flights of stairs. I stared at the carpet on which I was kneeling, trying to find the energy to raise my head. It was a dark carpet, with simple and rather austere geometric patterns. Somebody really should hire an interior decorator here.

Get a grip! I told myself, and clambered to my feet.

Looking around, I saw that I was standing in a longish room, almost a corridor, with doors leading off at regular intervals to the sides. At the very end of the room was a large double door of dark wood. Between me and the door stood only the desk, and behind the desk sat the anxious, narrow-faced young man.

This had to be Mr Stone.

'I'm here to see Mr Ambrose,' I panted with as much dignity as one can muster while gasping for air. Quickly I tried to smooth out the wrinkles in my dress, but they resisted stubbornly.

'Are you...?' he left the sentence hanging in the air as if afraid to finish it.

'I'm Miss Lillian Linton.'

'Ah, yes.' Mr Stone nodded. 'I was told you would be coming.' He threw a furtive look back at the double door. 'And you really have to see Mr Ambrose, Miss?'

'Yes.'

'And you have an appointment?'

'Yes.'

'Very well.'

Swallowing, Mr Stone picked up one of those horn-speak-through thingies from his desk and placed it at his mouth.

'Um... Sir? I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr Ambrose, Sir, but there is someone to see you. A Miss Lillian Linton.'

He put the horn to his ear for a few seconds, listening, then frowned and looked up at me apologetically. 'Err... Miss? Mr Ambrose says he does not know a Miss Linton.'

I gave him my very sweetest smile – sweeter than solid chocolate. 'Tell him we met last Friday in the street. I'm sure he will remember.'

'Of course, Miss.' Mr Stone cleared his throat and nodded, dutifully. He was really a very nice, accommodating young man. 'Mr Ambrose? The young lady says...'

He repeated my message. For a second or two, everything was still and silent – then Mr Stone jerked the listening-horn away from his ear. I could faintly hear someone shouting on the other end and caught a string of expletives.

'Yes, Mr Ambrose, Sir.' Mr Stone had gone as white as a sheet and was speaking hurriedly into the horn. 'Certainly, Mr Ambrose, Sir. What should I tell the young lady, Mr Ambrose, Sir?'

The answer came over the line, and Mr Stone's eyes widened, his face turning beet red.

'But Sir! I... I cannot tell her to go and do... that No, not a respectable young lady!'

The shouting on the other end resumed, probably on the subject of my alleged respectability. It seemed that Mr Ambrose had quite a lot to say about that, and none of it was complimentary.

'Well, what then, Mr Ambrose, Sir?' asked the young man timidly. He waited again, then nodded when the answer came. 'Yes, Sir. Immediately, Sir.'

Mr Stone looked up at me, his ears still red.

'Err... Mr Ambrose wishes to see you at once, Miss Linton.'

I bet he doesn't thought, but said nothing and instead merely smiled at the young desk clerk again. He was really quite nice – for a man.

Mr Stone rose, and, leading me past his desk, guided me to the large double-door that was, as I now realized, the entrance to the private office of Mr Rikkard Ambrose.

Just before the door he stopped, leaned over and whispered. 'Err... Miss? Be careful, yes? Mr Ambrose is very... um... well, just be careful.'

With that elucidating statement, he held the door open for me, and I entered, my heart hammering, knowing that the future course of my life might well depend on the man inside. Now why didn't that make me feel very good?

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Perhaps you were already expecting Lilly to meet Mr Ambrose in this chapter, yet I felt I needed to explore his surroundings a little bit. How did you find the descriptions, and the implications for his personality? ;)

Incidentally, if you want to find out a little bit more about the historical background regarding this installment, the Victorian gadgets used in the above chapter are actually quite historically accurate. Tube or string telephones were actually pretty much the height of technical development during the nineteenth century. Makes one appreciate the conveniences of the modern day era, doesn't it? Especially taking into account that inventions like the string telephone had been around for more than 100 years, having been created more than a century earlier by the inventor Robert Hooke. But because the clocks of technological development moved somewhat slower back slower back then than they do now, it wasn't till the Victorian Era that big companies took note of these inventions and began developing them for commercially. At the very height of string-telephoning, this sort of technology enabled people to talk to each other from as far away as (drum roll...) three entire miles! Isn't that a wonderful technological achievement? ;-) However, unfortunately, those early string-phones didn't yet possess an inbuilt GPS ;-)

Yours truly,

Sir Rob