08. Inventing a Sibling and Getting Poked in the Eye

"Excuse me?" 2:49

Mr Stone looked up from his desk and his eyes widened. 2:51

"I would like to see Mr Ambrose, please. I have an appointment." 2:57

Mr Stone blinked, sat motionless for a few seconds, and blinked again. Only then did he recover from his astonishment. "Oh, err... I'm so sorry, Sir. Of course, of course. I was only distracted for a moment because just half an hour ago there was a young lady here, also asking for Mr Ambrose, and you and her..." He trailed of, gazing in amazement at the small young man with longish brown hair standing in front of him. 3:12

I tried to force a smile on my face. "That was my sister." 3:18

"Oh, that explains it," said Mr Stone, a bright smile ousting the puzzled expression on his face. "May I say, Sir, that you and she share the most amazingfamily resemblance?" 3:27

"I've o en thought so myself." 3:31

"Even your hairstyles are rather similar. It is truly intriguing." 3:35

"Thank you." 3:37

"And what is your name, Sir?" 3:39

"Li-" I bit my tongue. Damn! In my haste to get home, change and return, I had completely forgotten that as a man, I could hardly go by the name of Lillian. My mind was as blank as the walls of Mr Ambrose's o ice as I tried to think of a name, any name that I could tell Mr Stone. Finally, my thoughts landed on the royal family. 3:54

"Victor!" I blurted out. "Victor Linton." 3:59

Thank God. When all else failed, one could still rely on the queen of England. 3:54

"Very well, Mr Linton. Wait a moment please, while I see if Mr Ambrose is ready to receive you." 4:7

He took up the metal horn from the desk and spoke into it. 4:7

"Mr Ambrose? A Mr Linton to see you." 4:11

In response, there came only silence from the other end. 4:14

"Err... Mr Ambrose? Are you there?" 4:20

Now there did come a noise from the other end. It sounded like something between a moan from a medieval torture chamber and the growl of a wounded Siberian tiger. 4:24

"Mr Ambrose, Sir? Are you all right?" 4:29

Apparently Mr Ambrose was all right, because he started to speak a few seconds later. I couldn't make out what he was saying, and part of me was glad for that. Stone nodded, put down the horn and then looked up at me smiling. 4:37

"Mr Linton," he said, "I have been informed that you have been accepted as Mr Simmons' replacement and are now a member of the sta . May I take this opportunity to welcome you?" He got up, walked around the desk held out a hand for me to shake. 4:51

Hesitantly, I reached out. I had never shaken a man's hand before, only curtsied. Would he be able to tell that I was a woman by a handshake? Determined not to give him any clues, I resolved to make my grip convincingly strong and masculine. 5:14

"Ouch!" Mr Stone grimaced. All right, maybe I had overdone it with the masculinity... "Err... yes. Welcome, as I said. Now, where was I..." Cautiously, he removed his hand from my grip and flexed his fingers. 5:44

"Ah, yes. Mr Ambrose regrets to inform you that he does not have time to receive you right now, since urgent business detains him. He wishes you to go directly into the secretary's o ice and wait for instructions there." 6:09

I frowned. Urgent business that detains him? What business could be so urgent that he couldn't receive his private secretary? It should be my job to help him with his urgent business, shouldn't it? But orders were orders. And though I usually wasn't very good at obeying orders, these were di erent: other than with my aunt trying to boss me around, Mr Ambrose would have to pay me for bossing me around. So I just asked: "The secretary's o ice?" 6:29

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

With his thumb, Mr Stone indicated a door to the right of his desk. "That door over there. I hope you find everything to your satisfaction, Mr Linton. If there is anything I can help you with, please don't hesitate to ask." 6:54

Wow. If all my new colleagues were like this, working for a living would actually be a piece of cake. Maybe even a chocolate cake with extra sugar. 7:14

Then I remembered my new employer, and reconsidered. 7:4

No. Not a piece of cake. Definitely not. A piece of granite might be an appropriate description. 7:17

I walked over to the door Mr Stone had indicated. I reached for the doorknob. I grasped and turned it, holding my breath. With a low 'click', the door swung open. Nervously, I peered into my new domain. 7:7

The room was just as I might have expected: bare stone walls, heavy curtains, a large desk. It looked like a smaller version of Mr Ambrose's o ice, only that here, the desk stood against the wall and much of the space was taken up by enormous shelves holding large, di erently coloured boxes. They all had numbers and letters written on them. 7:41

Good God, what was this? Seeing these vast mountains of paper, it occurred to me for the first time to wonder what the duties of a private secretary would actually be. Ever since my discovery of his wealth, I had expected Mr Rikkard Ambrose to be a rich landowner, and that as his secretary I would maybe have to write a few letters for him when he was too lazy to do it himself. But apparently he wrote and received a hell of a lot more than just "a few letters". I was in for more than I had bargained for. 7:59

Tip-toeing over to one of the boxes, I could see under the cryptic message '29V118' the explanation 'Georg. G. R.' Spi ing. Who was Georg G. R.? Sounded foreign. He had to be a most dedicated letter-writer, though. I reached out to open the box, then hesitated. 8:20

But why not? A er all, I was his secretary now. I would have to look through most of these sooner or later. Yes, that was an excellent excuse. Much better than "I'm just nosy". 8:5

I opened the box and took a few papers out. 8:7

What I found made me feel even more puzzled. They weren't letters. They were maps, drawings of mountains, with short annotations about such things as rockers, nuggets and a whole lot of other things I had never heard of in my life. 8:34

Mystified, I put the papers back into the box and put back on the shelf again. 8:4

Then it occurred to me: why was I still waiting? Why had Mr Rich and Mysterious not called me yet to assist him in his oh-so-urgent business? I wanted to step out between the shelves, but before I could do so I noticed a door behind them. From the outlay of the room I supposed it to be a connecting door to Mr Ambrose's o ice. I approached it and carefully tried the knob. 8:48

Locked. 8:49

Blimey, this was getting on my nerves! 8:7

But it was up to him to give me work, not the other way around. Having nothing better to do, I strolled over to the window and looked out over the city. As had been evident already from the outside, Empire House was a lot taller than any of the surrounding buildings and provided a stunning view. My o ice – I felt a thrill go through me at the words – m yo ice faced west, and in the distance I could see the white dome of St. Paul's Cathedral rising over the houses. I waited. And waited. 9:3

Great Paul struck eleven, and still I waited. 9:8

I was just about to leave the room and ask Mr Stone if anything was wrong, when I heard a strange sizzling noise from the direction of my desk. Eyebrows raised, I went over to investigate. 9:19

The noise seemed to be coming from within the wall besides my desk. Whoever had put the stones there had done a shoddy job of it, because in the wall directly over my desktop was a hole, about an inch in diameter. The sizzling noise seemed to originate from there. 9:39

Curious, I bent forward and put my eye to the hole. I couldn't see anything inside; it was pitch-black. But I could hear the sizzling noise getting louder and louder, until... 9:5

"Ouch!" 9:58

My Dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, 3:7

I most humbly apologise for the lack in length in this chapter. I am quite busy with spring cleaning, trying to make my majestic mansion in 19th century England more habitable. There are so many old family portraits in the attic... ;) 3:8

I truly hope that you enjoyed the above installment! Do you have any intriguing ideas what sort of devious Victorian machinery Mr Rikkard Ambrose has installed in his o ice? :-) 3:7

Your humble servant, 3:7

Sir Rob 3:7

GLOSSARY: 3:2

Spling: An old British English term for "Great" or "Awesome". Sadly, it has fallen into disuse. I hereby call on every lover of the English language to use it in casual conversation to help in the resurrection of this spl ing word! 3:7

Continue reading next part