



Exclusive Sneak Peek ~ Read Chapters 1-3

Chapter One

September 1891

London, England

Mr. Driscoll James Rose, second son of the late Earl of Huntington, brother to the current Earl of Huntington, and part owner of The Rose Room, the most exclusive and popular gaming club in all of London, tossed his pencil down on his desk in frustration.

Bloody, bloody, hell.

He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes with his fists. No matter how hard he tried, of late he could not keep his mind on his work.

The malaise he'd been suffering from the past few weeks was not going away. His intelligent mind knew there was no reason for it. He had no money worries, the ladies considered him handsome, he could pretty much pick and choose whatever woman he wanted, either for an evening or a lifetime, and although not a titled lord himself, he was a member of the nobility through his father and brother. So why the hell did he feel lost? Like he was floating, just getting through each day? Waiting for something to happen?

The excitement of owning, running, and making a success of a gaming club had worn off. Now it was only work. And drudgery at that.

Three years ago, he and his younger brother, Dante, had approached Hunt, the eldest of the Rose brothers with a plan to open a gaming club. Although gambling was illegal, there were several places in London that offered such entertainment. The authorities were willing to look the other way for an owner who was a member of the *ton*, as well as the recipient of an occasional evening of gratis entertainment for themselves.

The brothers had worked out a plan where Hunt would provide the initial financing of the business and would hold a small interest in the profits. Driscoll and Dante would do the bulk of the work, although Hunt would appear every so often to mix with the clients and observe that his investment was doing well.

Driscoll pushed away from his desk and slumped in his chair, his legs stretched out, his feet crossed at the ankles. Why wasn't it enough anymore? According to his younger brother, he needed to avail himself of an exclusive mistress to see to his needs. Hunt, on the other hand, who was recently wed and nauseatingly besotted with his new wife thought Driscoll should join him in the chains of matrimony.

The first seemed like too much involvement, and the second was unquestionably too much involvement. He'd heard Dante's grumbling about the demands his mistresses made. That usually happened a week or two before he gave said mistress a fine piece of jewelry along with her congé and moved onto the next one.

That was much too intricate for Driscoll. Not that he never indulged, he was a man after all with a man's needs, but the thought of providing a woman with clothing, food, housing, and expensive trinkets for the sole purpose of satisfying his sexual needs left him cold.

And doing the same for a life-long commitment of a wife left him terrified.

"It looks like we need to offer an escort home to Lord Benson again." Dante entered the office and dropped into a chair and leaned back linking his fingers at the back of his head.

"In his cups?"

"Yes. Absolutely sotted. He can barely make it from table to table. I'm afraid he might decide to bring up all that expensive brandy he's been drinking onto the gaming floor."

Driscoll stood. "I need a break from these financial records, anyway. I'll take care of it."

Dante plunked his feet on his desk and closed his eyes. "Good. I could use a break."

Driscoll made his way down the thick-carpeted stairs to the gaming floor. As expected, the room was crowded and the gaming tables full. He nodded to Stephen Welsh, the man running the Hazard game for a nice group of gamblers. As he made his way through the room, moving from table to table, he commented and joked with various members until he spotted Benson.

The man was swaying on his feet while he watched the dice play. Dante had been correct. The man appeared a bit green. Driscoll looked around and waved David Jenkins, one of the security men, over.

“Yes, Mr. Rose.” The dark-haired guard stood almost as tall as Driscoll. He’d been in their employ since they opened and had the ability to handle delicate matters without causing a scene.

“We need to get Benson out of here.” Driscoll nodded in the man’s direction. “Use one of our older carriages in case he casts up his accounts during the ride home.”

“I believe his lordship arrived in his own carriage.”

Leave it to Jenkins to know everything that needed to be known. “Perfect, then. Assist him outside and get him on his way.”

The guard nodded and strode to where Benson stood. He leaned down and said something that had the man immediately straightening up. Jenkins patted him on the shoulder in a friendly but determined manner and led him from the room.

Problem solved.

Driscoll wandered the area, but the usual thrill he received from watching what he and his brother had accomplished was just not there. Maybe it was time to visit with Sir Phillip DuBois-Gifford, their contact at the Home Office to see if there was an assignment for him to add some excitement to his life.

Unbeknownst to practically everyone in London, the Rose brothers were oftentimes called upon by Sir Phillip to handle delicate matters for the Crown. Sir Phillip was not on any record of employment with the Home Office, but he managed to work behind the scenes and correct sensitive situations near and dear to the Prime Minister and sometimes the Queen herself.

After Driscoll had spent another thirty minutes meandering the rooms while consuming two brandies, he returned to the upstairs office. Dante was still in the same position, snapping a rubber band.

“All right, little brother. Break over.” He shoved Dante’s feet off the desk.

“Benson on his way?” Dante asked as he stood and stretched.

“Yes. Luckily the man brought his own carriage so any consequences from his overindulgence would be his own mess.”

Dante left the room and Driscoll sat once again at his desk in the corner and pulled the ledger closer. He had to push himself to focus, but eventually settled down and continued his work, albeit with no more enthusiasm than when he'd left.

It was nearing midnight when a noise startled him, and he looked up. The sound seemed to come from the window on the far side of the room. He'd left it open earlier when the room seemed to grow stuffy. Perhaps it was a branch from the tree outside hitting the side of the building.

He shrugged and continued with his work. Within seconds, another thump caught his attention. He looked up to see a young man climb through the window, stumble, then fall to the floor with a crash.

* * *

Miss Amelia Smythe grunted as her hip hit the floor and a sharp pain shot down her leg like an arrow hitting its mark. She winced, but didn't cry out, trying to remain as silent as possible. From what she had observed perched on the tree branch from which she'd just jumped, this room was unoccupied.

She climbed to her feet and straightened her jacket.

“May I help you, sir?”

Amelia almost fell back out the window at the sound of a man's voice. She whirled around and stared for a few seconds at two deep brown, possibly angered, eyes. “Why are you here?” She barely got the words out.

The man, his dark brown hair falling over his broad forehead, was quite good-looking the female part of her noticed. He merely raised his eyebrows and continued to stare at her. Given this unexpected setback, it was probably best if she got out of there as quickly as possible. “Um, if you will excuse me, sir, I will leave now.” She waved at the window.

“Wait!” He walked toward her, his full lips tipped in a slight grin. “You're not a young man.”

She shook her head and sucked in a breath as the room seemed to shrink as the man grew closer. He was broad-shouldered, tall, and quite imposing. His aristocratic features blended well

with his deep brown eyes. A slight tingling erupted in her middle and all the available air in the room had seemed to rush out the opened window.

She'd watched the space from outside on her perch while another man had sat with his feet up on a desk, snapping rubber bands. Eventually, he got up, stretched, and left. She hadn't seen anyone else enter.

Her mistake.

"No. I am not a young man. I'm sorry for the disturbance, sir." She nodded toward the desk she hadn't seen from the tree and said, "I will leave you to your work, then."

He reached out and grabbed her hand, a frown of curiosity on his face. "Why did you crawl through my window?"

In full panic now with the man gripping her hand, she blurted the first thing that came to mind. "It's raining outside."

Although it seemed impossible, he raised his brows even higher. "You do not possess an umbrella?"

She shook her head, wondering if she could make an escape before he called the Watch. Although truth be known, if they hauled her off to jail it would be better than what she had waiting for her at home.

No. She mis-spoke. Or rather, mis-thought. She had no home. Her horrid stepbrother, Randolph had committed the shocking offense of using her to pay a gambling debt to the ghastly Daniel Lyons. She felt the need to roll her eyes every time she thought of the man's name.

Randolph, the Viscount Newton was her thirty-year old stepbrother. With nine years between them and no common parents, they'd never been close in the fifteen years their parents had been married to each other.

When not away at school, Randolph had spent a good part of his time teasing and tormenting her. When he grew to manhood, his form of torture turned to reminding her he was the heir and when his papa died, control over her person and dowry would pass to him. With her mother dead these past few years, and then her stepfather, the former Viscount Newton, it hadn't taken long for the snake to drag her to London and offer her services as mistress to Mr. Lyons in lieu of paying his losses in a card game.

Once Randolph had told her to prepare herself because Mr. Lyons was to arrive at their doorstep in two days to 'claim' her, she had no choice but to run. Her dilemma was being

without sufficient funds, and since she'd spent most of her life in the country, she had no friends in London to turn to, either.

Of course, it would have been better had she not panicked, and instead thought carefully about her circumstances and made a plan for herself before she fled the house. At least a plan better than tumbling through the window into this man's office to escape the bad weather.

She cleared her throat, pushing her thoughts from her old dilemma to this new one. "Actually, I do possess an umbrella, but unfortunately, I do not have it with me." She tugged her hand from the man's hold and edged back toward the window, keeping her eye on him. "Now if you will excuse me. . ."

Quickly, he reached out and took her hand again. "No. I am not going to let you crawl back out the window and possibly break your neck."

She huffed. What was it with men who thought they could tell one what to do and what not to do? She was a woman grown of twenty-one years.

Adopting a pleasant demeanor, she said, "No need to concern yourself, sir. I will be fine, I can assure you." She wiped the rain from her cheeks. "I made it up here, didn't I?"

Apparently, her attempt at levity fell flat as the man continued to stare at her. "You will tell me who you are, why you are dressed like a man, and why you climbed through my window." He nodded in the direction of the window.

She shifted from one foot to the other. Mayhap if she gave him some information, he would let her go. "I am Miss Amelia Pence." There was no point in offering her correct name. The last thing she needed was him tracking down her stepbrother. "It is quite wet out there and I saw the light in your window and hoped to spend only a short time attempting to dry off and warm up." As if to validate her words, she shivered, then raised her chin.

There. She had given him an almost-honest answer.

"Did it not occur to you to enter through the front door to do the same?" She hated how he seemed to switch from anger to laughing at her. "And why the outfit?" He flicked his finger up and down.

He was becoming quite vexing. Amelia drew herself up, attempting to look impressive even though she was in trousers, soaking wet and just made a complete cake of herself by falling through the window. "Why I am wearing these clothes is none of your concern, sir. Now if you

will excuse me and seeing that you won't let me go back out the way I entered, I will just use that door behind you to make my way downstairs and exit the building."

Feeling less confident than her words, she moved to go around him and came to a complete halt when he stepped in front of the door. "No." He shook his head, again with a bit of levity in his look. "I am afraid I demand more answers from you before I let you go."

Amelia groaned and shivered again. This solution to escape Randolph was becoming more vexing than her problem.

Chapter Two

Driscoll doubted the woman had given her real name, or a reason why the devil she was climbing through the window. However, he was having more fun at her expense than he'd had in ages.

She was a pretty little thing. Big blue eyes and blonde ringlets, now wet and plastered to her forehead. Plump lips perfect for kissing tempted him and a small nose with a scattering of light freckles across her cheeks gave her an elfish look and brought a smile to his face. When she'd first fallen through the window, had he gotten a good look at her in wet trousers and her shirt clinging to her body, displaying all her wonderful curves, he would never have addressed her as 'sir'.

He brought himself up short, realizing that the gentleman in him should not be ogling her, but addressing how she shivered, and how those lovely, kissable lips were beginning to turn blue. Unusually cool September night air, combined with her wet clothing, could have the girl suffering from an ague.

"Despite your desire to flee my presence, I must insist you stay until you are dry." A slight rumbling from her middle presented another problem. "Have you eaten dinner?"

Her shaking grew worse and she shrugged which meant to him that she had not eaten. He moved to the pot belly stove in the middle of the office and threw in another log.

Miss Pence did not move from her spot despite him walking away, which was promising. He grabbed his greatcoat from the coat rack near his desk and beckoned her to move toward the stove.

The poor girl seemed to have lost her spirit and shuffled meekly to the chair he pointed to and sat. "Remove your jacket."

Although her eyes grew wide at his command, she did as he bid before he draped the greatcoat over her shoulders. "I will send to the kitchen for tea and some food."

Miss Pence merely nodded.

"Can I trust you not to leave while I give instructions to the cook?"

"I w-w-won't l-leave." She pulled the coat flaps together and bent forward, getting closer to the stove.

Driscoll left, not at all sure if he could trust her not to vanish while he was gone. Since he knew nothing about the girl, it was questionable why he even cared. Was he truly so bored with his life that a wet, sopping woman, dressed in trousers, tumbling through the window in his office, interested him enough that he was reluctant to let her go until he learned her story?

Sadly, yes.

The club employed a cook who prepared food for the guests to partake of in a buffet style from around midnight until closing. It had originally begun as a courtesy, but despite the cost, it soon turned a nice profit when those who availed themselves of food remained and continued to gamble.

Driscoll headed to the table and filled a plate with cheese, cold meats, bread, a berry tart, and two pieces of fruit.

“Hungry tonight, brother?” Dante eyed the full plate from across the table where he filled his own plate.

“Yes.” For some reason he hesitated to share the information about the young lady—Miss Pence—with his brother. Most likely the chit would be gone by the time he returned, anyway.

To his surprise, and annoying delight, Miss Pence sat precisely where he’d left her. From his approach behind, her slumped shoulders and occasional shiver touched him. ’Twas obvious the girl was in trouble. Hopefully, over food and the tea he’d asked Cook to send up, she might be more forthcoming about her situation.

“I think this might help to warm you up, also.” He handed her the plate of food that she took with enough enthusiasm to convince him that the poor girl must have been starving.

“Th-th-thank you.” She clutched the plate with shaky hands.

“I don’t want to be disrespectful, Miss Pence, but I think the best way for you to warm up is to remove your wet clothes.”

He winced when her eyes widened, and it appeared as though she was about to bolt.

“No. No, that is not what I meant.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I mean there is a bedroom on this floor—”

Miss Pence jumped up, placed the plate of food on the table in front of her and made for the door, his greatcoat dropping to the floor. *Bloody hell*, he was making a muck of things.

“No. Please.” He bolted ahead of her and blocked the door.

“Move away from the door, sir.” She raised her chin, the wet curls clinging to her forehead. The combination of her shaky voice and body only made him feel worse. The last thing he wanted was to frighten the girl and have her race back out into the foul weather.

He moved aside. “Please allow me to explain. I went about this all wrong.”

She placed her hand on the door latch but didn’t open the door, the caution in her eyes making him back up.

“There is another room on this floor,” he smartly did not mention the word ‘bed’, “where you can change into something else. Then we can spread your clothes in front of the fire and allow them to dry while you eat.” He raised his hand. “I swear to you, Miss Pence, I am a gentleman, and I would never, ever take advantage of a young lady.”

She drew herself up, and although she was at least a half a foot shorter than his six feet, she gave the impression of looking down at him. “You have not even introduced yourself, sir.”

“I truly beg your pardon, Miss Pence. I am Mr. Driscoll Rose. I am brother to the Earl of Huntington. My other brother, Mr. Dante Rose and myself, own this club.”

She visibly relaxed, but not completely. “I do not travel in Society, Mr. Rose, so I must admit I do not recognize your brother’s title. However, I am familiar with The Rose Room, which is, I assume, where I managed to make my very awkward and embarrassing entrance?”

Despite her disheveled appearance and abrupt arrival, she managed to enthrall him further with her humor, and Driscoll felt more than the usual ennui for the first time in weeks. “Yes. This is the second floor of The Rose Room.”

* * *

Amelia breathed a sigh of relief. The Rose Room was the one place her brother would never find her. He’d been banned from the elite club for fist-fighting over three weeks before.

When she’d spotted the open, welcoming, and well-lit window at the back of the building, she had no idea what the structure housed. A large oak tree, with branches a mere few feet from the window was far too tempting not to climb.

As she studied Mr. Rose, she had no idea how to accomplish it, but if she could remain here until morning, it would give her time to come up with a plan while assuaging her hunger and staying warm and dry.

Depending on this nice man to be the gentleman he claimed, she came up with a decision. “Yes, Mr. Rose. I believe a dry set of clothes would be most welcome.”

The smile he offered her caused butterflies to dance in her middle. However, she was neither at a time, nor in a place to encourage attention from a man. She was already on the run from two men. What she needed was a way to earn money without her stepbrother finding out so she could leave London.

“Excellent. I will have one of our maids accompany you to the room and help you change. The women we employ to clean and help in the kitchen live in rooms in the basement. Perhaps one of them will have a more appropriate outfit for you to wear.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Rose. You are too kind.”

He stepped to the door and called to someone to send up Betsy. He then waved her toward the food. “Please, Miss Pence.”

With a great deal of thankfulness, Amelia returned to the seat she’d so abruptly left and helped herself to some bread and cheese.

She tried very hard to be a lady, but she hadn’t eaten all day and was quite hungry. Mr. Rose took the seat across from her, them both enjoying the heat from the stove. He didn’t speak, but watched her in a way that was, remarkably, not threatening.

He hopped up at a knock at the door and admitted a gentleman carrying a teapot, followed by a young woman.

“Ah, good evening, Betsy. This is Miss Pence who is in need of a dry set of clothes. Can you accommodate her?”

The maid eyed Amelia and nodded. “Yes, Mr. Rose. I believe I have a few articles for Miss Pence to wear.”

“Excellent. Please fetch them, and then you can escort our guest to the bedchamber down the corridor and help her change.”

The maid dipped and left them, not raising a brow or showing any sort of surprise. Despite what she’d witnessed so far, perhaps Mr. Rose was a bit of a rake and oftentimes had women arrive at the club looking for clothing and a place to sleep.

She pushed that unwanted thought from her mind and continued with the food, particularly relishing the warmth from the tea.

“I don’t wish to pry, Miss Pence, but may I ask why you were climbing a tree at,” he looked over at the clock hanging on the wall, “one o’clock in the morning?” He grinned before she

could answer. “And please don’t tell me you endangered yourself by climbing a wet, slippery tree because you did not have an umbrella at hand.”

Amelia wiped her mouth and placed the napkin next to her now empty plate. “I appreciate everything you did for me, Mr. Rose. However, despite your kindness I cannot tell you why. All I can do is assure you that I am not running from a crime, nor am I involved in anything illegal.”

Mr. Rose stared at her, obviously not happy with her answer, but he did not seem to be overly concerned about it either.

“I thank you very much for the food and a chance to dry off and warm up, but I will take up no more of your time.” If he was going to continue questioning her, she needed to remove herself before she said something to her detriment. She rose and almost made it to the exit before a large hand slapped against the door, preventing her from opening it.

She leaned her head against it and sighed. She could not tell Mr. Rose that her stepbrother was looking for her. Even though she was of legal age, most people would return her to Randolph, assuming as her guardian, he knew what was best for her.

Hardly.

Behind her heat radiated from Mr. Rose’s body, combined with the sound of his breathing, the air sweetened with mint. “No, Miss Pence.”

He broke with all propriety and placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I will not allow you to wander the city in the rain. I don’t know from what or from whom you are running, but a lady alone in the dark on the streets of London at this late hour is much too dangerous. I do not enjoy reading about murders and other horrendous things happening to lovely young women in my morning newspaper.”

Amelia closed her eyes, fighting tears. She was frightened, penniless, worn out, cold, and in possession of no plan to avoid Randolph. Why was a stranger kinder to her and more concerned for her welfare than a relative who was supposed to be her guardian and protector?

Mr. Rose backed away, perhaps realizing the impropriety of touching her. “I insist you avail yourself of the empty bedroom where Betsy will take you. You may stay the night, and I assure you no one will bother you. In fact, there is a sturdy lock on the door that you can engage.”

Although she hadn’t been familiar with the Rose brothers in her short time in London, she’d learned that The Rose Room was an elite gaming club owned and run by honest gentlemen connected to the nobility. Compared to Randolph’s plans for her, which would result in her

forever banished from polite society, and the life she had wished for herself, Mr. Rose's kind offer to let her stay at the club was a minor infraction.

"I will accept your offer, Mr. Rose. I am sure I am breaking some sort of rule of propriety in doing so, but since I know so few people in London there isn't much that can harm my reputation at this point."

He looked as though he wanted to ask a question, but her drawn appearance must have been enough for him to merely nod. "Very well. When Betsy returns with the clothes for you, I will have her take you to the bedchamber.

"I reiterate, please do engage the lock, which will make me feel better. We rarely have trouble in the club, but I do not wish to take any chances with your well-being and good name."

Shortly after their conversation, Betsy returned to the room with articles of clothing draped over her arm. At Mr. Rose's instructions the young maid escorted Amelia to a lovely bedchamber several doors down from the office where she and Mr. Rose had conversed.

The room was done in very masculine colors and style. No doubt the space was used for the brothers when they decided to stay overnight.

Once Betsy made sure Amelia knew where everything was and offered her the clothes, which consisted of a soft cotton nightgown and dressing gown, the maid left. Clenching the borrowed clothes in her hands, Amelia sat on the bed and stared out the window at the darkness.

She had a place for tonight, but what would tomorrow bring?

Chapter Three

Around noon the next day, Driscoll looked up from the newspaper he was reading as Dante entered the brothers' dining room at the club and dropped into the chair across from him.

"Good morning big brother." He reached across the table and took a slice of toast from Driscoll's plate and smothered it with jam. "Can you tell me why when I tried to enter the bedroom down the hall, the door was locked?"

Driscoll shrugged and continued to eat.

"Your lack of response is interesting." Dante finished the stolen toast and crossed his arms over his chest, tilting the chair back on two legs. "Does the lock on the door have something to do with the full plate of food I saw you hustle upstairs last night? You, who never eats beyond ten o'clock at night?"

"Sometimes I eat beyond ten o'clock," Driscoll mumbled.

Raised eyebrows was Dante's only response. "Well, I know you don't have a woman in there." He gestured toward the bedroom down the hall.

Driscoll stiffened and frowned. "Why not? Why couldn't I have a woman in there?"

"Because you never raise your head from your ledgers long enough to notice anyone else. Let alone a female. And, even if you were to go against your nature and have a woman in there, even *you* wouldn't be sitting here eating breakfast while she lounges in bed."

Driscoll threw his napkin down alongside his plate. "I beg to differ. I do enjoy females, and might I remind you that I took Miss Bailey to the theater just last week?"

"Brother, she was my date that I foisted off on you." Dante stood and filled a plate from the sideboard. Eggs, bacon, tomatoes, sausage, toast and an orange.

"What do you want with the bedroom, anyway?" Driscoll studied him. "It's already after noon, you certainly don't plan to sleep now."

Dante sat and eyed his food. "No. I spent the night at Mrs. Bancroft's house, but I needed a clean shirt."

"Why don't you keep clothes at her house? You sleep there more than your own bed."

Dante grinned. "Ah, but we don't do much sleeping, brother." He took a sip of tea. "But you are avoiding my question. Why is the door locked?"

“I have a guest.” Lord, how he wished to avoid this conversation. He wasn’t yet sure what to make of Miss Pence. Frankly, he was relieved to hear that the door was still locked, since he hadn’t the nerve to try it himself. That meant she hadn’t escaped during the night.

There was no tree outside that room.

He’d decided if she had remained by morning that he would offer her temporary lodging, as long as he was comfortable that she wasn’t, indeed, running from some criminal activity.

However, there was nothing about the woman that suggested wrongdoing. Of course, shimmying up trees in the rain to climb through the window of an unknown building did suggest some sort of misconduct. At least from what he’d known about proper young ladies; the ones he had avoided like the plague since they were all anxious to lead a man to the altar.

Dante stared at him. “Well?”

“What?”

His brother sighed. “Who is your ‘guest’ in the bedroom?”

Driscoll removed his spectacles and rubbed them with his handkerchief. A subtle maneuver to allow him time to gather his thoughts that was not lost on his brother. “Last night a woman fell through the window into the office.” Bloody hell there must have been a better way to say that.

Dante’s brows shot to his hairline. “Fell through the window? How the devil did she do that?”

“Climbed the tree outside the window,” he mumbled.

Dante let out a low whistle. “And here I thought you led the most uninteresting life possible.”

Driscoll frowned. “Do you want to hear the rest of the story, or just sit there and insult me?”

“Can I do both?” He grinned and shoveled more food into his mouth. He waved his fork at Driscoll. “Continue.”

“Her name is Miss Pence. She is running from something, but I doubt—with as much assurance as I can muster—that she is a criminal.”

“She climbs through the window of a gaming club in the middle of the night and you don’t think there is anything criminal about her? Did she drag her bag of ill-gotten goods with her, or leave them at the base of the tree to retrieve after she cleaned out our office?”

“Do you want to hear what I know?”

“Yes.” Dante smirked.

“She said her name is Miss Amelia Pence. She was familiar with the club but didn’t know that was where she was seeking shelter from the rain.” Driscoll took a sip of tea. “She was cold, wet, tired and hungry.”

“And you being you, never noticed if she was attractive or not?”

Driscoll growled. “Yes, she is attractive, and yes I noticed. And no, before you ask, I did not offer to share the bed with her.”

Dante shook his head. “Pity.”

“She was frightened, Dante. Whatever it is she is running from can’t be good.”

“So, what is your plan here, big brother?”

“Frankly, I don’t know.” Alone in his own bed in his flat, he’d spent a good part of the time he should have been sleeping thinking that very same thing. She trusted him enough to accept his offer of a warm, dry bed.

“I don’t mean to come across as unfeeling, but we can’t have a strange woman staying at the club. I don’t know anyone by the name of Pence, so that could be a made-up name. Despite your good-natured belief that she is not a criminal, we have no way of knowing if Scotland Yard is looking for her.”

Driscoll sighed, hearing his very own thoughts spoken out loud by his brother. “I think we should see what she says this morning. For all I know, she went back out the window, and that would be the end of our problem.”

“There is no tree outside the bedroom.”

The sound of footsteps drew their attention. Miss Pence stood in the doorway, looking very much like a little lost lamb.

Everything protective in him reared its head. Driscoll took a deep breath, his heart speeding up. The devil take it, he was becoming ridiculous about the chit.

Both men stood. “Good morning, Miss Pence,” Driscoll said.

She moved farther into the room and offered a slight smile. “I just wanted to thank you for allowing me to stay here last night.” She dipped a curtsy, which she didn’t pull off very well since she was back into her trousers. Without saying another word, she turned to leave.

“Wait,” Driscoll said and walked up to her, taking her hand in his. A very soft hand, one that only a lady would possess. She had never done hard work. Another clue to her identity. “You must at least eat breakfast before you go.”

Miss Pence hesitated and glanced toward Dante.

“May I make known to you my brother, Mr. Dante Rose.” Driscoll waved at his brother.
“Dante, this is Miss Amelia Pence.”

She backed up when Dante snorted.

* * *

Amelia felt the heat rise to her face at the snicker coming from Mr. Dante Rose. She’d wrestled with herself for the past hour, wondering if she should just make her way out of the building without seeking Driscoll Rose to thank him.

Part of that time was also spent trying to figure out where she would go from here. She had to avoid her brother, as well as Mr. Lyons who would no doubt be searching for her as well.

Damn her stepbrother for making the stupid wager! It hurt to acknowledge that she was not surprised by what he’d done. Even though they had never been close, she didn’t think he held her in such low regard to wager her into a life of disgrace and degradation.

Driscoll pulled out a chair. “Please, Miss Pence. I would like you to join us, have breakfast and possibly allow us to help you in whatever way we are able.”

Dante Rose sat back, his arms crossed over his chest and watched her with all the warmth and consideration of a fox watching his prey. He was certainly nothing like his brother.

She walked to the sideboard and filled a plate with food while Driscoll fussed over her, showing her things she might like.

“Sit down, brother,” Dante said. “The woman can fill her own plate.”

Amelia sat in the chair Driscoll had pulled out for her.

“I thought you were anxious to change your shirt, Dante.” Driscoll glared at his brother.

“Yes. I do need to change, but I wouldn’t miss this show for the world.” He grinned, but not in a friendly way, and Amelia’s appetite vanished. She took a sip of her tea and tried to eat since she had no idea when her next meal would be.

“Please pay no attention to my brother, Miss Pence.” Driscoll scowled in his direction. “I know it’s hard to believe, but despite his glib remarks, underneath his façade he is a decent person. Most times.”

Amelia wasn’t so sure about that, but she tried her best to eat. Once she got started, she realized despite the meal she’d eaten the night before—in the middle of the night, actually—she was still quite hungry this morning.

Once she finished, with—thankfully—the brothers speaking about the previous night’s winnings with each other and ignoring her, she pushed her plate aside and wiped her mouth. That seemed to be a signal between the brothers to begin questioning her.

“Miss Pence, I understand if you do not wish to tell us why you find yourself in the position you are in. However, if we are to offer you any assistance, we need to know at least a bit more about you.” Driscoll pushed his spectacles up farther on his nose. “Please.”

Amelia gathered her thoughts and realized there was scant information she could provide since her life had been unexceptional. At least until she was offered as a wager, then got up the nerve to escape her stepbrother and climb a tree.

“Why don’t you start with why neither of us recognize your name?” Dante took the lead in questioning which immediately put her on edge. “We are familiar with almost all of London. Our patrons come from the nobility, the upper merchant class and the newly arrived American wealthy. Yet, Pence isn’t a name we’ve heard before.”

“I have spent most of my life in the country.” She was going to tell the truth as much as she could without them learning who her brother was. Her governess from years ago had been adamant that it was far easier to keep one’s story straight if it did not contain lies.

Driscoll nodded, seeming pleased that she at least answered one of their questions. “What brought you to London? Did you come for the purpose of joining Society and making your come-out?”

Amelia tried very hard not to laugh. A come-out? Should she tell these nice men her only come-out would be a forced introduction into the demimonde?

“No.” She could not tell them she’d been ordered by her stepbrother to vacate the lovely family home in the country that she’d lived in most of her life because he’d rented it out from under her. Had she known at the time about his evil plans for her, she would have attempted to secure a position as a companion or a governess. Even working in a shop would be preferable to what her future currently looked like.

“I don’t suppose you wish to tell us where you are currently living in London?” Driscoll leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. He was so very nice and comfortable. Just speaking to him made her feel as though nothing bad would happen to her.

Then she realized she was dreaming, and this man was in no way responsible for her well-being. For all she knew he had a wife and several children for whom he was currently caring.

She found that to be a depressing thought.

Besides, she'd stopped believing in fairy tales when she was a child. There was no knight in shining armor going to ride up to The Rose Room and sweep her away on his white horse to live happily ever after in his castle.

She shook her head. "No. I'm afraid I cannot."

The brothers looked at each other, Dante Rose with raised brows and Driscoll with what only could be described as sympathy.

Unfortunately, that was her undoing. All the pent-up anger and fear she'd lived with since she had snuck out of her stepbrother's house rose to the surface and decided to make its presence known in a torrent of tears.

"Aw, shite," Dante said.

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