

Pretty Little Rose

By

Lucy Wild

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# Chapter One

When the stones hit her bedroom window, Rose Winter was in the midst of a very important discussion. Ranged about her were her three best friends, all in fits of giggles. They had spent the evening together hidden away in her room, enjoying the opportunity to be apart from their parents and decide once and for all who was the most eligible bachelor in Yorkshire.

Geraldine was of the opinion that there could be no finer catch than Thaddeus Burlingham, heir to the enormous estate at Crossways, soon to follow his father into a seat in the House of Lords.

“Poppycock,” was Amelia’s response. “I could never marry him. He’d have his idiot brother hanging around the house and we’d get no peace at all. If you ask me, far better to go for Richard.”

“Richard Mayhew?” Enid replied. “But his estate is less than half the size of Thaddeus’s.”

“Size isn’t everything, Enid, my dear.”

They were still giggling when the window rattled behind them a moment later. Rose leapt to her feet. “He’s here! How do I look?”

She ran her fingers through her hair before pinching her cheeks to draw the colour out whilst her friends breathlessly nodded their approval. “Wish me luck,” she squeaked, running over to the window. She stopped with her fingertips on the handle, taking a deep breath and forcing the smile from her face. It was replaced by a look of cool nonchalance by the time she pushed open the window and leaned out.

The night was chilly. The heat of the summer had begun to fade just a few days before and Rose shivered as a zephyr brushed past. “Yes?” she asked, looking down imperiously on the form of a tall man in a riding suit, his hat tipped off his head in readiness for her appearance.

The man bowed deeply as she stifled a giggle, Amelia whispering behind her, “Ask him if he thinks size is everything.”

“Good evening, Lady Winter,” he called up to her.

“Shush!” she snapped back, pressing a finger to her lips. “You will wake my parents. What do you want, Jonathan?”

“To see you, of course,” he replied, his voice lower than before. “You told me to come at this time, remember?”

“I will be down in a minute. Don’t go anywhere.”

She blew him a kiss before pulling the window closed and turning back to her friends. “This is it,” she said, doing her best to contain her excitement. “I will be a woman when I return.”

“A first kiss,” Geraldine sighed, picking up the nearest cushion and hugging it to her chest. “How exciting.”

“Promise us one thing,” Amelia said as Rose picked up her cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“What’s that?”

“That you give us every tiny miniscule little detail of that kiss.”

Rose nodded. “If I come back, of course, he might just sweep me off my feet and elope with me somewhere.”

She left the room on a wave of their giggles, the sound of their excited voices gradually fading away as she tiptoed downstairs. The gaslight in the study lit the hallway. That was a bad sign. It suggested her father was still working.

She paused by the edge of the study door, listening hard. No sound. With her breath held, she darted across to the other side, only exhaling when she leaned against the far wall. She was safe. He must have left the light on before retiring.

“Rose Winter,” his voice called out from the study. “Come in here this instant.”

She froze, her heart sinking. He had seen her then. “Yes, Father,” she said, walking into his study with her shoulders slumped, her face downcast. She glanced up in time to find him setting down his pen ready for her. “Anything amiss, Father?”

“You were sneaking out again, weren’t you?”

“No, Father, I promise. I was just going to get some fresh air.”

“What’s this, behind me?”

“A curtain, Father.”

Lord Winter frowned, folding his arms as he did so. “I do not find that amusing. That is a window, as you well know. They are the most delightful of inventions. Keep curtain makers in business for one thing. For another, they let in all the fresh air any noble lady could ever want in her lungs.”

“Yes, Father. I am aware of the purpose of a window.”

“Oh you are? Only, perhaps you might then explain why you need to go gallivanting outside when it is gone ten and all respectable people are indoors and settling down for the night?”

She looked at him closely. Did he know about Jonathan? He couldn't, could he? “I was only going to take the air for a brief spell, Father. Surely, you do not judge me for that.”

“I don't mind taking the air at all. But if that were the case, why did you feel the need to sneak past my study like a housebreaker in training?”

“For fun.”

“That is not amusing. Off to bed.”

“But, Father, please listen to me.”

“No buts. I know exactly why you went out at this time last week and the week before and I kept silent, hoping it was only a childish fancy that would pass. But three times with one man without a chaperone is not acceptable. For heaven's sake, my girl, one time is unacceptable but three! I will not have you out again this night nor any other night. Bed is the place for unmarried girls when night comes and bed is where you're going this instant. Is that clear?”

Rose opened her mouth to protest but closed it again as he leaned forwards, eyebrows raised, waiting for her counter argument. “Once you are married,” he continued, “you can gallivant all you wish for you will be my problem no longer. Until that day, you do as I say. Now off to bed.”

“Yes, Father,” she replied, walking round the desk to kiss his cheek. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Rose,” he replied, stroking her arm as she turned away. “Sleep well.”

She walked out of the study without looking back, heading upstairs and then into her bedroom, finding her friends in close conference around a contraband sweet loaf purloined from the kitchen just that afternoon.

“That was quick,” Geraldine said as Rose headed straight past her.

“I’m not done yet,” Rose replied, pushing open the window and swinging her leg over the sill. “If Father comes up, tell him I am fast asleep.”

She grabbed hold of the drainpipe, monkeying her way down it whilst her friends peered at her from above.

“She’ll be killed,” Geraldine said.

“I can’t look,” Amelia added, staring all the more closely at her descent.

“You look most undignified,” Enid called after her.

“Shush!” Rose hissed back up at them, almost losing her grip, her foot slipping from the brick as she descended the last few feet to the ground. She regained her grip and continued down, finally dropping with a bend of her knees, standing up to take a curtsy as a cheer went up from her bedroom.

Spinning on her heels she faced Jonathan who was smiling admiringly back at her. “Not a fan of doors?”

“I like to make a memorable entrance,” she replied.

“That was more of a memorable exit but let’s not quibble. Shall we?”